

Britain's vote against Syrian military action provokes political crisis

Chris Marsden, Julie Hyland
31 August 2013

Bitter recriminations have followed the parliamentary defeat of a UK government motion intended to authorize military action against Syria.

Prime Minister David Cameron recalled parliament on Thursday to present the case for war. The intention was to utilize the chemical weapon attack in Ghouta to legitimize long-standing US-led plans for regime change in Syria.

Cameron's efforts to do so only exposed the campaign of lies and disinformation once again being employed to sanction war.

On the day of the vote, the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) issued a document identifying the Assad regime as responsible for the chemical attack on Ghouta, without being able to present any evidence. Instead the JIC wrote of "limited but growing" evidence to this effect and the lack of a "plausible alternative scenarios to regime responsibility."

In fact, there is substantial evidence that the Syrian opposition has access to chemical weapons and was behind the attack, aiming to create a *casus belli* for Western military intervention. In the parliamentary debate, Cameron himself was forced to admit that there was "no 100 percent certainty about who is responsible," and that it was a "matter of judgement."

The legal advice of Attorney General Dominic Grieve simply replicated the assertion made at the time of the Iraq war that action could be justified based on the UNs "responsibility to protect" doctrine. This assertion was challenged after Iraq because UN resolution 1674 states that Security Council backing is required.

The glaring holes in the government's war-mongering are especially damaging due to the scale of public opposition. Amid deepening austerity and sharp social tensions, the overwhelming opinion in the country—especially after Iraq—is that nothing said by the

government can be trusted, and that nothing justifies another bloody military adventure.

In addition, the ruling class is divided over the wisdom of military action against Syria, which some fear will further destabilize the Middle East and damage Britain's strategic interests.

MPs rejected the principle of UK military action against President Bashar al-Assad's government by 285 votes to 272, with Cameron being forced to accept that he would not use the Royal Prerogative to join US-led strikes. Cameron and the government spent Friday bemoaning the damage done by the vote, and attacking Labour leader Ed Miliband for giving "succour" to Assad, "siding" with Russia and damaging Britain's "special relationship" with the US.

Cameron said he regretted not being able to achieve a consensus on military action, and that it was up to Miliband to "defend the way he behaved."

Defense Secretary Philip Hammond stated, "It is certainly going to place some strain on the special relationship... Common sense must tell us that the Assad regime is going to be a little bit less uncomfortable tonight as a result of this decision."

Miliband replied by urging the government not to "wash its hands" or "abandon" Syria, while stressing the need to distinguish Britain's national interests from those of the US. The UK-US relationship "remains strong", he said, but "we must lead in the right way for Britain from our national interest and indeed our global interest. Now sometimes that will mean agreeing with what America is doing and the way it's going about things, and sometimes it will mean doing things in a different way."

In order to leave the door open for a change in course, Miliband complained that Cameron's difficulty was "he was working to a political timetable set elsewhere".

Miliband has been forced to deny reports from government sources and his own party that he only decided against supporting the government resolution late on Wednesday, when he announced he would place an amendment stating the need to proceed through the UN Security Council.

Many factors will have influenced his change of course, above all fear of the type of public backlash that resulted from Labour's war against Iraq. One of the main reasons for his selection as party leader was that he was out of the country in 2003 when the invasion was orchestrated by his predecessors, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

But of considerable significance will have been the opportunity to come forward as the spokesman for those sections of the ruling class concerned at British involvement in Syria.

Thursday saw a rebellion by 30 Conservative and nine Liberal Democrat MPs whose votes ultimately defeated the government. The debate in the House of Lords on Syria was even more heavily opposed to the proposed military action, with speeches running ten to one against—many by Tory ex-ministers. A vote was not taken in the Lords, but would have resulted in an even larger government defeat.

Some of the most vocal critics come from former leading representatives of the armed forces, including Lord Richard Dannatt, General Sir Michael Rose, Commodore Malcolm Williams and Colonel S C H Ashworth.

Dannatt is the former head of the Armed Forces and was then an advisor to Cameron. In the Lords debate, he said, "We have pulled back from military intervention because the risks and consequences, whether intended or unintended, are too great and the uncertainties that we have identified are too many", adding that "circumstances might change".

In the *Times*, Rose denounced Blair for his August 27 column in the same newspaper calling for military action against Syria, declaring it "is like having an arsonist advise on how to put out a fire he lit. The invasion of Iraq, initiated by Bush and supported so zealously by Blair, triggered the unravelling of the status quo in the Middle East..."

It is concern for the preservation of the "status quo"—by which is meant imperialist domination of the oil-rich region—that lies behind the conflict within the

British ruling class.

Blair remains the most unalloyed proponent of an alliance with the US in pursuing global hegemony by military means. In his *Times* comment he baldly urged people to "leave aside any moral argument and just think of our interests for a moment."

The danger was of a divided Syria with "Assad in power in the richest part of the country; Iran, with Russia's support, ascendant; a bitter sectarian fury running the Syrian eastern hinterland—and us, apparently impotent."

The reaction to Thursday's vote in some quarters was apoplectic. Writing in the *Financial Times* political columnist Janan Ganesh said the "vote did the Commons as a whole little credit... MPs effectively ruled out the very principle of military action in Syria. Whether one is for or against intervention—and I am narrowly against—this is a rather extraordinary abdication from a NATO member and nuclear power."

The Blairite columnist for the *Telegraph*, Dan Hodges, announced his resignation from the Labour Party, complaining of a "catastrophe for British foreign policy."

Military action against Syria would still go ahead, he continued, without British participation and at the expense of "a loosening, or severing, of the 'special relationship'."

Hodges added that, "the implications go far beyond Syria. There is now no prospect of British support for any military strike against Iran, for example."

Hodges and Blair's statements confirm that invocations of humanitarian concerns over Syria are nothing more than a smokescreen for plans that ultimately end in war against Iran. Neither Washington nor London can countenance such a set-back in their campaign. The Obama administration is determined to press ahead with military action. For his part, Cameron has declared his support for such a "robust response" and will work to create the conditions for British participation to be resumed as soon as possible.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact