

New Zealand government signals support for US attack on Syria

Tom Peters

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While New Zealand's foreign minister, Murray McCully, yesterday welcomed the US-Russian plan to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons, the National Party government has already signalled its support for unilateral US military strikes on Syria.

McCully told TV One's "Q+A" program that New Zealand supported a resolution through the UN Security Council, but added that "we understand the US position perfectly." He said that New Zealand wanted to "exhaust the multilateral process before we look at anything outside it"—that is, unilateral US action.

McCully's comments are in line with those of Prime Minister John Key. Key told a press conference on September 9 he had a "very strong preference" for intervention mandated by a UN Security Council resolution, but was "considering" a request by US Secretary of State John Kerry to give "moral support" for a unilateral attack.

Key left no doubt that he would endorse US military action, stating: "It may be one of those situations where New Zealand will say... 'While our preference would be the Security Council we can understand why unilateral action is being taken'."

The government's call for a UN mandate reflects its concern about widespread anti-war sentiment among working people, who recall the lies used to justify the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Behind the scenes, Key and McCully have undoubtedly reassured Washington that it will have New Zealand's support for any military action against Syria.

US Interior Secretary Sally Jewell publicly thanked New Zealand on September 6 "for taking a strong and unambiguous stand against the horrendous use of chemical weapons against the people of Syria by the Assad regime."

Jewell's comment followed a communique issued by the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) meeting in the Marshall Islands, which blamed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for the August 21 chemical attack and called on the UN Security Council to hold his regime "to account." The annual PIF meeting includes the leaders of 13 small island nations but is dominated by US allies, Australia and New Zealand.

In his remarks on September 9, Key said that the PIF communique was based on secret "evidence" supplied by the US and UK governments, which he was "happy to accept" despite being unable to verify the claims.

From the outset, the corporate media, including so-called liberal commentators, recycled the US lies advanced to justify a war on Syria. Josie Pagani, a former press secretary of the "left" Alliance Party, wrote on August 28 that "those who protested against the illegal war in Iraq should be calling on the UN and civilised countries to take action."

Dominion Post columnist Sean Plunket similarly declared on August 31 that while the invasion of Iraq was based on "dodgy intelligence on weapons of mass destruction", military action against Syria was "the right thing to do" to punish Assad for "gassing his own citizens."

In fact, the US has provided no evidence that the Assad regime "gassed its own citizens." The Western-backed anti-Assad militias that are dominated by reactionary Al Qaeda-linked groups have boasted about possessing chemical weapons and are far more likely to have carried out the attack, to provide the pretext for US intervention.

Prime Minister Key also repeated Obama's lie that a bombardment would not be intended to bring about "regime change." But that is exactly why the US and its allies have been backing Syria's opposition militias,

as part of wider efforts to ensure American domination throughout the Middle East.

There is every reason to believe that the New Zealand government will not stop at “moral support” with a US military intervention. The 1999–2008 Labour government, supported by the Alliance and the Greens, participated in the invasion of Afghanistan and deployed troops to assist the occupation of Iraq, despite overwhelming public opposition.

The opposition Labour Party has already indicated that it would back another criminal US war. In a statement on September 11, Foreign Affairs spokesman Phil Goff praised Obama’s decision to postpone seeking Congressional support for military action. However, he added that the Russian plan for dismantling Syria’s chemical weapons “will be hugely difficult”. He did not rule out supporting a military strike.

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Speaking to Radio NZ on August 29, Goff called for military action against the Assad regime as a “last resort.” On September 6 he declared that the US—which used chemical weapons against civilians in Vietnam—had “absolutely the moral high ground” against Assad.

Goff attacked Russia for supplying arms to the Syrian regime, while remaining silent on the funding and weapons given to the so-called rebels by the US and its European and Middle Eastern allies. He called for the US to “put unbearable pressure on Syria and its allies” and said “a one-off military strike” would not be enough.

For its part, the Green Party issued a statement on September 3 demanding “concerted action” by the UN Security Council to bring “those responsible” for the chemical attack “to account.” While Green MP Kennedy Graham called for a “non-military” solution, his party has denounced Russia and China for vetoing Security Council resolutions that would pave the way for military intervention.

While posturing as opponents of US military strikes, the pseudo-left groups—Fightback, Socialist Aotearoa (SA) and the International Socialist Organisation (ISO)—are all on record as supporting the US-backed “rebels”, falsely depicting them as carrying out a “revolution.”

Like their international counterparts, these organisations are advocates of imperialist war. SA published a major statement in July last year headed “Why we support the Syrian revolution—it’s time for you to go Bashar.” The ISO has issued a formal denunciation of a US-led intervention, while simultaneously declaring it stood behind “the Syrian people’s revolution”—that is, the Islamist militias funded and armed by the US and its allies.

Since the Labour government’s participation in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, New Zealand’s military and intelligence collaboration with the US has intensified, culminating in the signing of the 2010 Wellington Declaration and 2012 Washington Declaration. These agreements effectively restored the full military ties that had been strained in the 1980s as a result of NZ’s anti-nuclear legislation which effectively blocked US warships from its ports.

New Zealand is closely integrated into the US military’s global intelligence and communications network that would be used in any attack on Syria. The country’s secretive Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) operates the Waihopai satellite communications monitoring base on the South Island and the Tangimoana radio interception facility near Palmerston North. Waihopai, which opened in 1989 and expanded during 1998, continued its operations despite the rift over NZ’s anti-nuclear legislation.



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