

UK sends military trainers to Syria

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On March 26, as Britain's general election campaign began, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon announced that Britain would send 75 military trainers and staff to aid the so-called "moderate" opposition forces in Syria.

The announcement marked an expansion of Britain's aggressive role in the United States-led intervention, which is targeting not only the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but also the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Britain is the second largest contributor to the coalition campaign in Iraq against ISIS, providing arms to the Kurdish Peshmerga forces and reconnaissance and operational support for air strikes in Iraq, along with military advisers and several hundred combat-ready troops to train local forces.

It has not, however, participated in the air strikes on Syria being carried out by the US, Canada and various Middle East countries.

The Ministry of Defence said of its Syria operation that it would "train and equip thousands of screened members of the opposition over the next three years to help them defend Syrian communities against ISIL's brutal attacks before leading offensives themselves." This follows the announcement of a "train and equip" programme involving the US, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, a similar mid-February announcement of a programme to "train and equip" fighters at a Turkish base, and another announcement at the end of February of plans to train the opposition in Syria in the next four-to-six weeks.

There was no mention of who the "moderate forces" in Syria are. That is because there are no such forces. The aim of the training programs is to create a militia capable of installing a regime in Syria willing to carry out the dictates of the imperialist powers.

The training, supposedly after screening applicants to weed out extremist Islamic militants, will take place in Turkey and other countries in the region that are part of

the anti-ISIS coalition, presumably including Jordan.

Defence Secretary Fallon also announced that the UK will send two Sentinel aircraft to Iraq to provide area-wide surveillance of ISIS and track IED (improvised explosive device)-laying activity. These aircraft will join Britain's Tornados and Reaper Remotely Piloted Aircraft that have conducted 194 strikes over Iraq and gathered intelligence, working alongside the all-weather electronic surveillance aircraft, Rivet Joint.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government signed up to the US plans against ISIS in Iraq and Syria last year with the full support of the opposition Labour Party. In justifying the government's plans to join the coalition against ISIS, Prime Minister David Cameron declared last September at the United Nations that the "international community" must not be "so frozen with fear" by past mistakes that it fails to confront the threat of ISIS. "We need to act and we need to act now," he said.

The announcement that Britain will deploy military trainers for the war in Syria follows in the wake of the decision by Cameron to send military advisors to Ukraine. The government is seeking to counter criticism from leading figures in the defence and political establishment that Britain has become virtually invisible on the international arena.

A scathing report from the House of Commons Defence Committee last February lambasted the government for its limited involvement in the war against ISIS. It said Britain had conducted only 6 percent of the air strikes against ISIS in Iraq, and that during its December visit to Iraq, the parliamentary committee had found only three British military personnel outside the Kurdish regions, compared to 400 Australians, 280 Italians and 300 Spanish.

According to the report, the committee was shocked at the inability or unwillingness of Britain's leading military personnel to explain their Iraq strategy, or even

say whether a strategy exists. The committee added that no one would say who is in charge of the UK's intervention.

It noted that with both the Iraqi and Peshmerga forces needing “structural reform,” degrading ISIS, containing it and making it ineffectual might be a more realistic and immediately achievable aim than attempting to destroy it.

The parliamentary committee went on to call for the UK to “play a greater role in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.” It recommended a larger deployment of troops to Iraq for “training” purposes and greater “defence engagement” with the regional powers, although it was not in favour of deploying British combat troops.

The government's announcement that it is sending military advisors to Syria, made without the consent of the Syrian government, is in violation of international law and tantamount to a declaration of war.

The United Nations Security Council has been unable to provide the necessary legal fig leaf for war against Syria due to opposition from Russia. According to Reuters, Syria's state news agency Sana has charged that British support for the Syrian opposition amounts to a “commitment to supporting terrorism.”

The British government is using ISIS as a pretext to reverse its humiliating climb-down in August 2013, when it was forced to abandon plans to bomb Syria. Amid divisions within the ruling class over strategy and widespread popular opposition, a resolution authorising the bombing of Syria was defeated in parliament.

Washington and London had seized on a chemical attack in a Damascus suburb, most likely carried out by US-backed Islamists, as a casus belli—an opportunity to activate plans for regime-change in Syria. But concern within military circles that the US and Britain were grossly unprepared for a war that could bring them into headlong collision with Russia split the Conservative Party. A total of 30 Conservative MPs voted against the government's resolution, joining with the Labour Party, which opposed an air intervention in Syria.

Partly as a result of the vote, the Obama administration shelved its plans to join the Islamists in attacking Syrian government forces, and instead stepped up its efforts to reach a deal with Iran as a means of isolating China and Russia, Syria's main backer.

When asked by Labour leader Ed Miliband in parliament in August 2013 for an assurance that Cameron would not use the royal prerogative to start a military intervention without parliamentary approval, Cameron replied, “I can give that assurance... it is clear to me that the British parliament, reflecting the views of the British people, does not want to see British military action.” But the dispatch of military advisers to Syria is in evident violation of that pledge.

Speaking in Toronto during an official visit to Canada last Friday, Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond expressed support for the Canadian government's decision to join the air bombardment of Syria and his dismay over the British parliament's vote against air strikes in 2013. Saying that the mission's ultimate goal remained the same, he concluded, “We're delighted that others are able to do the lift in Syria that is equally required.”

The US-stoked wars in Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Afghanistan and Yemen, and the civil war in Ukraine, are getting barely a mention in the current British election campaign. This is not surprising, since there is little popular support for these wars.



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