

Conservative government concealed UK participation in Syria air strikes

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18 July 2015

It came to light this week that British pilots have carried out air strikes in flagrant disregard for the August 2013 parliamentary vote against British military involvement in Syria.

This flies in the face of assurances made only last week by Prime Minister David Cameron and Defence Secretary Michael Fallon that the government would seek parliamentary approval before conducting air strikes against Islamic State (ISIS) targets in Syria.

News of the British pilots' involvement came after a Freedom of Information request by the human rights group Reprieve.

In an Orwellian justification, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) said, "The UK is not conducting air strikes in Syria. But we have a longstanding embed programme with allies, where small numbers of UK personnel act under the command of host nations.

"That has been the case in Syria, although there are currently no pilots operating in this region. When embedded, UK personnel are effectively operating as foreign troops."

It is thought that up to 20 MoD personnel, embedded with US, Canadian and French forces, had been "authorised to deploy with their units to participate in coalition operations" against ISIS.

The MoD said that ministers would have been aware of their role. It was later confirmed that Cameron and Fallon knew of their involvement in bombing missions.

Fallon claimed there was no contradiction between the involvement of British pilots and the parliamentary veto on military action in Syria. "These are a handful of British pilots who have been embedded with American forces and are part of an American military operation for which the Americans have full approval," he said.

The government has made open its intention to try and overturn the 2013 vote, which had prevented Britain from openly joining the US in its military intervention into

Syria. Last year, Parliament voted in support of air strikes against ISIS in Iraq, using the pretext that Baghdad had requested assistance. The UK has also provided extensive technical and logistical support to US air strikes in Syria.

In the face of popular opposition to wider involvement, and disagreements within ruling circles as to its efficacy, direct military action in Syria—at least publicly—was meant to be ruled out of the equation. Only on Thursday, Defence Minister Lord Howe presented a written ministerial statement from Fallon to Parliament, updating "on the military campaign against ISIL [ISIS] in Iraq and Syria."

"Since the outset of the air campaign, we have provided to Parliament a range of information on UK air activity," the statement read. "For transparency," it intoned, calculations of the total number of US strikes in the region had used both British and American methodology. The statement made no mention of British pilots taking military action in Syria.

The government has seized on the Tunisian beach massacre on June 26, in which 38 people were killed, 30 of whom were British, to push for a new vote on air strikes on Syria. On July 2, Fallon said that Parliament should reconsider the "illogicality" of not doing so, as "they [ISIS] don't differentiate between Syria and Iraq."

"There is no legal bar to us operating in Syria," he continued, "but we don't have the parliamentary approval for it."

"We don't need it at the moment," he went on, "because we are playing our part in the campaign and what we do in Iraq actually frees up the US aircraft to attack in Syria."

The defence secretary went on to indicate that the government was trying to link the Tunisian attack to Syria, proof of which would justify direct British military involvement. "If we can link it back, [if] it does link directly back to ISIL [ISIS] in Syria then we will have to

reflect with the rest of the coalition how best we deal with that.”

Cameron pledged a “full spectrum” response to the Tunisian assault, but indicated that he would wait until autumn—following the result of the Labour leadership contest—before trying to get a new parliamentary vote to permit air strikes.

A spokesman for the prime minister would not answer if interim Labour leader Harriet Harman was aware of the current involvement of British pilots.

Harman attended a special meeting of the National Security Council on Tuesday for a briefing by Cameron and military chiefs on Iraq and Syria. She was joined by Labour’s shadow Defence Secretary Vernon Coaker and Foreign Office Minister Dan Jarvis as the government sought the party’s backing for extending military action.

The meeting came after Harman had indicated Labour would not now oppose action in Syria. The current situation was different from that in 2013, she said, because ISIS was a terrorist organisation, while President Bashar al-Assad was the head of a government, albeit a “terrible regime.” Consequently, Labour would look “very seriously” at any new proposals.

In reality, the growth of ISIS is the direct outcome of US-led machinations in Syria, aimed at ousting the Assad regime. Atrocities committed by the terrorist grouping are in turn exploited to press for further escalation of the campaign for regime change.

Moreover, it is now widely acknowledged that the earlier encouragement of ISIS/ISIL and the continued backing for other Islamist groups fighting in Syria is aimed not merely at the removal of Assad, but a partition of the country which is already well under way.

The northern Turkish border areas are currently controlled by the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG).

A variety of often antagonistic Islamist groups control the northwest governorate of Idlib and are seeking to take the city of Daraa as well as establish control over the whole of the south bordering Jordan. These groups are also operating in Golan, bordering Israel.

ISIS presently controls Raqqa in northern central Syria and has advanced to Palmyra in the south.

The US bombing campaign in which Britain is participating openly in Iraq and covertly in Syria is designed to prevent ISIS from becoming the main beneficiary of the regime change operation against Assad. Even so, most bombing raids are carried out in support of the Kurdish forces largely allowing ISIS to pursue its

offensive against Assad.

Turkey and Jordan have made simultaneous preparations for invading Syria, with the aim of taking over large parts of its territory. Plans have been drawn up to carve out so-called “buffer zones” in the north and south of the country, according to recent reports.

In this renewed carve-up of the Middle East, Britain’s ruling elite is determined not to be left behind. In the wake of the resort assault in Tunisia, it has escalated its involvement in the region and beyond.

On July 2, Cameron met with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Downing Street, where they reportedly agreed that Assad “was a cause of the conflict” and discussed the need for a “transitional” government. On July 5, it was announced that Britain was sending 50 special forces to Tunisia to help “seek and destroy” ISIS, along with “Foreign Office experts.”

Disclosure of British involvement in Syria bombing missions came as the first contingent of US trained forces entered Syria on July 16. Fifty-four out of an intended 15,000 soldier US-backed “New Syrian Force” entered the country in a convoy of 30 vehicles. This represents a notable expansion of the open-ended war in Syria and Iraq launched by the Obama administration under the name of combating “violent extremism.”

The US has stepped up its bombing campaign, which has already involved some 5,000 combat sorties, targeting the cities of Kobani and Hasakah in Syria and Habbaniya, Mosul, Makmur, Sinjar and Tal Afar in Iraq.



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