

UK defence secretary admits flouting parliamentary ban on military involvement in Syrian war

Chris Marsden
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It should have been an occasion of high political drama of national import. Defence Secretary Michael Fallon had been forced to answer opposition MPs for the government covertly signing off on British pilots taking part in US and Canadian air raids in Syria—in naked defiance of not one but two parliamentary votes.

Instead Fallon was not only able to dismiss criticism from those he had concealed this from, but used the occasion to proclaim the government's intention to revisit the issue of UK military operations in Syria as early as September.

Last week a Freedom of Information request by the human rights group Reprieve forced the Ministry of Defence (MoD) to admit that British personnel, embedded with US, Canadian and other coalition forces, had been “authorised to deploy with their units to participate in coalition operations” against Islamic State/ISIL/ISIS/Daesh in Syria.

In August 2013, the British parliament voted down a government attempt to secure agreement in principle for military intervention against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. This was to be waged alongside the United States on the pretext of a chemical attack in Ghouta that was likely carried out by Washington-backed insurgents.

One year later, on September 26, parliament voted massively in favour of supporting British air strikes in Iraq and to take part in a renewed drive by the US to establish its control of the oil-rich Middle East—this time using the pretext of the emerging threat posed by ISIL to its puppet regime in Baghdad.

The motion recognised “the clear threat ISIL poses to the territorial integrity of Iraq,” but only permitted “the use of UK air strikes to support Iraqi, including

Kurdish, security forces’ efforts against ISIL in Iraq.”

In the face of public opposition to any attempt to expand the anti-ISIL campaign into a regime change operation in Syria that could provoke a regional war, the motion explicitly stated that it did “not endorse UK air strikes in Syria as part of this campaign and any proposal to do so would be subject to a separate vote in Parliament.”

It now transpires that this was being flouted by the government almost immediately. Fallon in parliament admitted that he had personally approved the deployment of embedded UK forces on a bombing mission for the first time in autumn 2014.

He faced a feeble protest led by Labour’s Defence Secretary Vernon Coaker.

Coaker seemed almost embarrassed to complain of how Fallon had lied to MPs, when only this month he and Prime Minister David Cameron had reassured the House of Commons that they would seek parliamentary approval before conducting air strikes in Syria. He framed his remarks as someone who would now find it more difficult to sell Labour support for such a shift to the electorate.

The government had risked undermining public confidence in the fight against ISIL, he complained: “Can you not see that your authorisation could have resulted in a British pilot being captured, tortured or indeed killed by ISIL? And can you not see how such an event would have undermined public confidence in our entire strategy to combat ISIL?”

“It is crucial ... that in these important and sensitive matters the confidence and trust of this parliament is maintained as well that of the British people. The government has acted in a way that puts that confidence

and trust at risk.” He added, “You can’t take Parliament with you if you keep Parliament in the dark.”

Coaker and interim Labour leader Harriet Harman last Tuesday attended a special meeting of the National Security Council to register their support for an extension of UK operations into Syria.

Fallon during yesterday’s debate admitted that five British pilots were involved in air strikes in Syria and 75 had been involved in wider allied military operations there. As justification for not informing parliament and why he had not exercised his right to withdraw permission for the use of British troops in operations that ran contrary to UK foreign policy, he variously declared:

? The 2013 vote had been about operations against Assad—before the emergence of ISIS.

? Over 30 British people had been killed in Tunisia by supporters of ISIS and it was in the UK’s interests to tackle it “at source.”

? The UK supported the purpose of operations against ISIS.

? The missions involving UK troops had been approved by allied governments.

? These were not British military operations and if they were “of course we would have come to Parliament for preliminary approval.”

Fallon did not survive unscathed because of the power of this eclectic defence, but because of the weakness of the attack waged by Labour and the Scottish National Party.

Only one MP, Labour’s Michael Meacher, so much as urged Fallon to consider his position, while a number of emboldened Tories urged a swift change in policy to allow for UK operations in Syria.

Fallon was left free to go on the offensive.

Asked whether the government would withdraw British pilots from carrying out operations in Syria until parliament had voted to take action there, he replied, “No ... we continue to have personnel embedded with American and Canadian forces. They are engaged in action that is legal, that is necessary and in action that I welcome and I would hope this house would welcome to help defeat ISIL.”

Making clear his intention to press for UK action in Syria, he stated that the “command and control” of ISIL “is in northern Syria... It is from there its weapons

and fighters flow into Iraq. It is from there that its global influence spreads and from where the direct threat to the UK comes... We are also determined to use the forces at our disposal to do more to tackle ISIL at its source.”

The UK’s ruling elite and its US ally have for over a decade now carried out their combined agenda of military aggression virtually unopposed—not only in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya but with the ongoing military provocations against Russia. Yesterday’s debate proved that when the government decides to move towards full participation in operations in Syria, it will do so with majority support in parliament and without serious opposition from any faction of Labour or the SNP.

None of the official parties are genuine opponents of war, because all vie for the support of a ruling elite for whom wars of conquest and for control of vital resources and markets are essential to their ongoing self-enrichment. Today MPs begin their summer holiday and will not reassemble until September 7. While they relax, the war in Iraq and Syria will rage on, conducted as always on the basis of lies and as a conspiracy against the express wishes of millions of working people.



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