

Parliamentary committee warns Cameron against UK military involvement in Syria

Julie Hyland
4 November 2015

Prime Minister David Cameron has shelved his plan to hold a parliamentary vote on British military intervention into Syria, according to reports in the *Guardian* and the *Times*.

The prime minister had said he would hold a vote in the next weeks. But he has apparently been forced to retreat due to fears that he is unable to secure a majority, especially following a report by parliament's Foreign Affairs Select Committee highly critical of British involvement.

Cameron lost a parliamentary vote on UK intervention in Syria in August 2013. Widespread public opposition and divisions within the ruling elite as to the efficacy of the proposed action saw the opposition Labour Party join with 35 Conservative MPs to veto the plan by 285 votes to 272.

With complaints that the vote had left Britain side-lined in US-led efforts to carve up the Middle East, Cameron was determined to press for another vote. To compensate for continued disaffection in Tory ranks, he sought to encourage up to 50 Labour MPs, opposed to new leader Jeremy Corbyn, to rebel against their party.

Corbyn's apparent acceptance that Labour MPs would be allowed a "free" vote on war seemed to have strengthened the prime minister's position. However, not only does it appear that Cameron failed to build the necessary support in the Labour Party, but divisions within his own party might now be larger than they were in 2013. This reflects the fact that differences within the ruling class have become more pronounced—especially since Russia began carrying out its own airstrikes in Syria in support of the Bashar al-Assad regime in September.

Cameron has taken the line of the Obama administration, insisting that military action against ISIL (Islamic State) must not involve any let up in US-led plans for regime change. By stressing the need for a "coherent international strategy that has a realistic chance

of defeating ISIL and of ending the civil war in Syria," the committee implicitly criticises not only Cameron's proposal, but current US strategy as well.

Significantly, the cross-party committee is dominated by Tory MPs and took evidence from 15 witnesses, including members of the Defence Committee.

The committee makes clear that it is not against military intervention per se. It notes that Britain is the second largest contributor to military action against Islamic State (ISIL) targets in Iraq and that these involve Tornado jets, "unconfirmed" numbers of armed and surveillance Reaper drones and some 800 personnel.

It states, without criticism, that the UK "flies surveillance and intelligence missions in Syria"—a reference to secretive operations taken in defiance of the 2013 vote and one in 2014 that only allowed for such action in Iraq. And it has just one line on the UK carrying out a "single airstrike in Syria in August 2015"—a reference to the targeted assassination of a British national, Reyaad Khan, authorised by Cameron in defiance of international law.

The committee repeats the claim that ISIL represents a "major threat" to the UK and that "Preventing further regional instability, indeed, re-establishing regional stability, and defeating the ideology underlying ISIL are plainly British national interests."

It insists, however, that there are "key issues that we think must be addressed" before extending airstrikes into Syria, warning that their benefits would be outweighed by the risks of "legal ambiguity, political chaos on the ground, military irrelevance, and diplomatic costs."

The "UK risks further reputational damage if the legal basis for airstrikes in Syria is not clear," it states in reference to the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. International law allows the use of force only in case of "invitation, UN Security Council authorisation, and self-defence," all of which raise problems, it indicates.

On UN authorisation—which is Labour’s position—the “impasse between the West and Russia over Syria makes this an extremely difficult goal,” given the divergence between the US and Russia and China. The Assad regime has not invited airstrikes and even if it were to request them, in “2012 the UK Government recognised the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as ‘the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people’.”

As regards the claim of self-defence, the report notes this is the standard argument of all those forces now intervening in Syria and which Cameron used as legal justification for authorising Khan’s murder in August. There is, however, no agreement on who it is that is being defended.

Most damning of all, the report acknowledges that the situation in Syria is a “proxy war as much as an internal conflict”—a “multi-layered conflict,” involving Russia and Iran in support of Assad, and Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the US “on the sides of various different parts of the opposition.”

The “conflicting strategic interests” on the part of all actors, “are prolonging and exacerbating the conflict,” it notes. This includes the fact that “various sides” are, in the words of one witness, either using ISIL “for their own purposes” or exploiting its “existence as a bogeyman to get support for themselves.”

This depiction conceals the primary role played by US and British imperialism in instigating the Syrian civil war, and helping organise and fund Assad’s opponents, as part of their broader geo-strategic interests in the region. If the committee is raising this as a pressing concern now, it is because Russian intervention has “appeared to limit the options available to others.”

Indicating the potential for a broader military conflagration, the report notes that there is a “genuine issue” as to the potential of Russian and US aircraft “becoming involved in hostilities” as “multiple air forces are now pursuing different agendas in Syria.”

Moreover, further airstrikes would only be beneficial if the gains made could be secured “on the ground.” Not only is there no agreement on the use of ground forces, but there is also no plan as to whose ground forces would take control of the land captured.

The report makes clear that, given the negligible military impact of Britain extending its bombing operations to Syria, the major political factor in favour of its involvement is that this “would be welcomed by our allies in the coalition” and “help the UK to be seen as a

‘good ally’ to the US and its partners in the region.”

The committee minimises such considerations, recommending that the government hold off on any vote and setting out concerns that military involvement would “compromise” the UK’s “diplomatic capability” as a supposed honest broker in the conflict. It references testimony urging the UK and the European Union to lead efforts to overcome the “polarisation” between “the US and Russia” and “between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.”

This point was made even more explicit in a *Guardian* article, written jointly by Labour’s Peter Ford (former ambassador to Syria) and Conservative MP Julian Lewis, who is chairman of the Defence Committee.

“The government has utterly failed to come up with any convincing rationale, *merely saying that we cannot leave it to the Americans to carry the burden,*” they wrote (emphasis added).

“The government is in denial that intervention in Syria means deciding which is the lesser of two evils, Assad or the Islamists, and acting accordingly,” the two charged, which “hobbles our military from the outset.”

Under these conditions, RAF involvement in Syria would present “enormous risks” as they would be “flying in the same skies as Russian aircraft whose mission is to ensure the victory of the Syrian army.”

“It is not at all reassuring to hear ‘reliable, high-level sources’ telling us that RAF pilots have latitude to attack Russian aircraft when they feel threatened,” they continue. “What about possible misunderstandings, accidents or even deliberate ‘false-flag’ operations designed precisely to engineer such an incident? Has all this been properly thought through? We see no sign that it has... In short, the arguments against bombing are compelling. If the prime minister is wise he will use the Russian intervention as a reason not to proceed, rather than risking a second defeat on an issue of war and peace in parliament or, at best, a pyrrhic victory.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact