

Citing Paris attacks, Jeremy Corbyn retreats from critique of UK foreign policy

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Jeremy Corbyn was due Saturday to make a defence of his leadership of the Labour Party from his critics in the Conservative Party and among Labour MPs.

In response to accusation that he is “unpatriotic”, Corbyn was to centre his speech on the UK’s foreign policy, telling a regional party conference in Hertfordshire, “For the past 14 years, Britain has been at the centre of a succession of disastrous wars that have brought devastation to large parts of the wider Middle East. They have increased, not diminished, the threats to our own national security in the process.”

But Corbyn abandoned his plans to speak in the wake of the terror attacks in France, tweeting instead: “Today, all our thoughts and sympathy are with the people of Paris.”

Justifying his decision, Corbyn added, “I have cancelled my engagements today to hold discussions on events in France with shadow cabinet colleagues and be briefed by Downing Street security officials.”

His tweet closed with the single sentence, “It’s vital at a time of such tragedy and outrage not to be drawn into responses which feed a cycle of violence and hatred.”

This is an extraordinary statement. The Labour leader was due to make a speech that—whatever faults it would have undoubtedly contained—would have blamed terrorist outrages such as those carried out in Paris on the predatory foreign policy pursued by Britain and other imperialist powers that has turned the Middle East into a hell on earth and which is now threatening Europe itself with a similar descent into chaos and death.

Yet instead of taking a public platform to outline an oppositional position, he listened to his various advisers who counselled him to once again take the path of capitulating to his opponents. He chose to say nothing

to the millions of people in the UK and elsewhere who would have no doubt agreed with his critique of Britain’s predatory wars and instead went into discussions with the very forces who have waged these wars and who are seeking to use the Paris atrocities to urge an escalation of military action in Syria.

Corbyn’s silence gave the warmongers days in which they had free rein to set the political agenda. This includes in the first instance Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, who has repeatedly stressed his intention to seek a fresh vote in parliament sanctioning the extension of UK bombing operations from Iraq into Syria.

On Monday, speaking from the G20 summit in Ankara, Turkey, Cameron reiterated his intention to push for a second vote, telling the BBC, “I have always said I think that it is sensible that we should. ISIL don’t recognize a border between Iraq and Syria and neither should we, but I need to build the argument, I need to take it to Parliament, I need to convince more people. We won’t hold that vote unless we can see that Parliament would endorse action because to fail on this would be damaging, it is not a question of damaging the government it is a question of not damaging our country and its reputation in the world.”

It is here that Corbyn’s latest retreat does most damage. The shadow cabinet he was consulting with over the weekend contains numerous advocates of military intervention in Syria, which are the forces Cameron is working with to win enough Labour MPs to get a vote to do so.

Corbyn’s shadow justice secretary, the Blairite Lord Falconer, told the BBC’s “Andrew Marr Show” that “everything must be done” to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS): “I’m not urging troops on the ground but ultimately ISIL [ISIS] must be defeated ... if

possible through a UN-sponsored process, but if not that, then nations come together.”

The reference to a United Nations process is a doffing of the hat to Labour’s official position that it will only support military action if it is endorsed by the Security Council. However, this did not stop Hilary Benn, the shadow foreign secretary, from indicating that Labour might back military action if the Tories advanced “a comprehensive plan”.

“If the Government wants to bring that forward, then we would look at it,” Benn said.

Off the front-bench, Labour MP John Woodcock, the chair of Labour defence committee and a leading opponent of Corbyn, told the *Daily Mirror* Saturday, “The brave Iraqis and Syrians fighting to remove ISIS’s base for terror are clear they will not succeed without coalition air support—this new attack should prompt the government and all political parties to look afresh at the case for extending the air campaign across the whole of the territory currently controlled by the extremists.”

Labour MP Mike Gapes said, “I hope it [the Paris attacks] will concentrate minds and give a renewed focus on how the UK can work internationally with others to crush and eliminate the Daesh [ISIS] caliphate cult in both Iraq and Syria and challenge and undermine its evil ideology.”

It was not until Monday that Corbyn made any significant statement on Syria in the aftermath of Paris. Speaking to ITV’s “Lorraine”, he welcomed the Vienna talks aimed at finding common ground with Russia and urged a political solution: “I am not saying sit round the table with ISIS, I am saying bring about a political settlement in Syria which will help then to bring some kind of unity government—technical government—in Syria,” he said.

What Corbyn is in fact advocating is not opposition to war in Syria, but seeking a united position with Russia—and at least a section of the Baathist regime even if that does not include Bashar al-Assad—against ISIS. This would only be a prelude to a combined military offensive.

Corbyn acknowledged as much when he added, “Of course you can’t really deal with so-called Islamic State unless you get a political settlement in Syria which allows you then to permanently degrade and destroy that organisation.”

None of this is fundamentally different to what Cameron and President Barack Obama were seeking to accomplish in talks with Russian President Putin at the G-20.

Obama has opposed calls for US “boots on the ground” from the Republicans and from within his own Democratic Party, countering that the current strategy of bombing should be intensified because “this is not conventional warfare.” UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has urged a “nationwide ceasefire” between Assad’s government and the pro-US opposition, which would pave the way for combined military action against ISIS that would clearly have UN backing.

When asked repeatedly in a subsequent interview by the BBC whether he would ever support military action in Syria, Corbyn replied, “I’m not saying I would or I wouldn’t. I’m saying it’s a hypothetical question at this stage.

“My view is we have to review our foreign policy, review the situation going on in the region and listen to words put forward by Obama and Ban Ki-moon. They made some very wise comments over the weekend.”



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