

Crisis over Syria bombing vote mounts in UK Labour Party

Chris Marsden
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The UK parliament will vote this week on whether British forces will take part in air strikes in Syria. The vote could take place as early as Wednesday.

Prime Minister David Cameron is counting on support from Labour MPs to secure a yes vote. But amid divisions within ruling circles over whether consolidating the UK-US alliance through participation is worth the associated risks, it is still uncertain whether he will get enough Labour votes to compensate for a Conservative rebellion.

Last time a vote was taken in 2013, there were 30 Tory MPs opposed, though reports are that this number has halved. The Tories have a 16-seat majority.

Cameron is making a direct appeal to Labour MPs for backing, urging them to “look at the arguments ... to keep our country, our people and indeed others in Europe safe.” Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond and Defence Secretary Michael Fallon have been in direct contact with Labour MPs, including those making up two-thirds of the Shadow Cabinet who support action.

Labour and Tory sources have claimed around 80 and possibly even 100 Labour MPs would back the government. But this depends, at least to a degree, on whether there is a free vote on the issue—as was suggested earlier by Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, the right-hand man of party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Corbyn is opposed to extending UK military action to Syria and a decision is expected at the shadow cabinet meeting today, which is to be addressed by both Corbyn and Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn, a strong advocate of war in Syria.

Benn has publicly opposed Corbyn on bombing Syria, telling the BBC, “We have heard compelling arguments both because of the threat to the United Kingdom and also because we are right to have been

taking the action that we have in Iraq to support the Iraqi government in trying to repel the invasion from ISIL.”

Labour’s right-wing are in fact in a direct alliance with the Tories, but have used the media and, more importantly, the political vacillations and attempts at compromise by Corbyn to push their line.

Corbyn has allowed the pro-war forces to make all the political running. He has made no direct appeal to working people to oppose war, let alone to denounce his opponents as warmongers—relying instead on internal party manoeuvres.

Up until Sunday, his most overt response to the open rebellion by his leadership team was to send a letter to party members stating that he did “not believe that the prime minister made a convincing case that British airstrikes on Syria would strengthen our national security or reduce the threat from ISIS.” He asked members whether they thought Parliament should “vote to authorise the bombing of Syria.”

MPs denounced this as an attempt to go behind the back of the shadow cabinet. At its meeting Friday, Corbyn was outnumbered by five to one, with only McDonnell, Shadow International Development Secretary Diane Abbott, Shadow Communities Secretary Jon Trickett and party chairman John Cryer backing him.

When Corbyn indicated that there may not be a free vote, but a party whip for a no vote, Labour’s Deputy Leader Tom Watson warned of a public split.

Watson has indicated that he will ask the shadow cabinet for a show of hands if Corbyn tries to block a free vote. According to him, this will then become official policy and a party whip can be imposed to support bombing. That would mean that Corbyn could be declared to be in defiance of party policy and

possibly face removal, with Watson acting as interim leader.

Labour MPs are reported to have taken legal advice on removing Corbyn, who would need 38 MPs backing him to have his name on a new leadership ballot—which he likely would not get. An unnamed shadow minister told the *Daily Mirror*, “A free vote avoids mass resignations and Jeremy limps on. If we force a whipped vote for military action and Jeremy broke that, he’d have to go.”

In response, McDonnell wrote pathetically on Twitter, “On Syria, can everyone calm down. We’re all simply working through the issues & coming to final decision. Don’t mistake democracy for division.”

The *Independent* has reported that Corbyn is “understood to be considering calling an emergency meeting of Labour’s ruling body, the National Executive Committee, (NEC), to change official policy—making the party explicitly anti-war” and “has been consulting Labour MPs to see whether they will back a ‘proposition’ laid in the Commons stating that ‘the Government has not made its case’ for extending air strikes.”

This met with howls of feigned indignation from within parliamentary party, because Cameron had supposedly not been given the chance to make his case!

The government will reportedly share a draft Commons motion with Labour’s chief whip, Rosie Winterton, before the shadow cabinet meets. The motion stresses claims meant to smooth the way for Labour MPs to vote yes—such as citing United Nations Security Council Resolution 2249 calling on states to take “all necessary measures” against Islamic State by eradicating “the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Iraq and Syria.”

Saturday was scheduled as a day of protest nationally by the Stop the War Coalition, from which Corbyn resigned as chairman when he became party leader. He again distanced himself from the organisation by not appearing at its London lobby of Downing Street and failing even to issue a supportive statement.

It was only on Sunday that Corbyn appeared on the BBC’s “Andrew Marr Show” to make a public statement. He said on the Syria vote, “It is the leader who decides,” only to then indicate that he had not yet done so. “I will make up my mind in due course,” he said.

Bombing would lead inevitably to civilian casualties and risks making the situation “worse, not better,” he said, stressing that he had the backing of the party membership and would seek the support of Labour’s NEC.

He “seriously questioned” Cameron’s claim that there are 70,000 moderate Syrian fighters ready to take on Islamic State on the ground.

Addressing talk of a coup to remove him as party leader, Corbyn said he was “not going anywhere,” adding that “there are some people who haven’t quite got used to the idea the party is in a different place.”

Even then, Corbyn finished with a placatory appeal to his enemies. No decision had been taken on whether MPs would be given a free vote, he said. “I’m going to find out what MPs think. Obviously there are strong views on both directions.”

He had received 70,000 responses to his questions on Syria from party members and, “Labour MPs need to listen to that voice. ... We will come to a decision as a party.”

“I understand dissent,” he stressed. “I understand disagreement from leadership.”

He talks to people who disagree with him, he added, “but it doesn’t have to be abusive, it doesn’t have to be personal. It doesn’t have to be nasty. I can be respectful and I’m respectful of differences of opinion within our party.”



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