

Mounting evidence of British “boots on the ground” in Syria

Jean Shaoul
8 September 2016

Yesterday, Britain hosted the High Negotiation Committee (HNC), representing more than 30 Syrian political and military forces seeking the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad.

UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson used the occasion to urge Russia to stop supporting the government and commit to a supposedly “democratic transition.” However, this only underscores the increasingly prominent role the UK is playing in the US-led regime change operation, including a covert and illegal military role on the ground with the aim of carving up Syria into ethno-religious enclaves.

Pictures published by the BBC in August showed a British Special Air Service (SAS) unit operating in Syria near an army base belonging to “rebel forces” close to the Syria-Iraq border. The pictures confirmed an earlier BBC report in March 2015 on British Special Forces’ operations on the front line, in defiance of the 2013 House of Commons vote against military intervention in Syria, which former Prime Minister David Cameron had promised to honour. Last December, parliament voted to support an air campaign against Islamic State (ISIS-Daesh) in Syria, but not the use of ground troops and Special Forces.

The secret deployment of the SAS is of a piece with the government’s campaign of lies, deceit and disinformation throughout the five-year-long civil war that has killed more than 400,000 people and displaced nearly half the Syrian population.

The war to topple the Assad regime is aimed at undermining the regional influence of his allies, Iran and Russia.

The *Guardian* recently produced further evidence of Cameron’s flouting of parliament’s officially declared wishes and disregard of the electorate. According to leaked contract documents, dated November 2014, soon after the 2013 vote, the government secretly began

funding a press office for the US and UK’s proxies in Syria, as part of Cameron’s “propaganda war against ISIS.”

The Foreign Office, in conjunction with the Ministry of Defence, hired contractors at a cost of millions to produce films, videos, military reports, radio broadcasts and social media posts in Arabic using the militias’ logos to deliver “strategic communications and media operations support to the Syrian moderate armed opposition” (MAO). Operating out of Istanbul, they were apparently using a front organisation, a humanitarian-style human rights organisation called the Conflict and Stability Fund.

It was part of a broader propaganda offensive focused on Syria, intended to promote “the moderate values of the revolution,” demonstrate the effectiveness of the MAO and create a climate of public opinion rejecting both the Assad regime and ISIS. The *Guardian* quoted a British source knowledgeable about the contracts as saying that the government was essentially running a “Free Syrian Army press office.”

The British government was closely monitoring their work and nothing was done without Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence approval.

The effort is in part an attempt to make good Britain’s failure, in 2013, to support military intervention in Syria which had angered Washington, as the *Guardian*’s source explained. The films and propaganda sent a message to the US State Department and its regional allies that were arming the SFA and the so-called “moderate” groups, and “That’s good PR to go back to the Pentagon.”

The character of the so-called moderates Britain was supporting emerged in June 2015, during the trial in London of a Swedish man, Bherlin Gildo, who was accused of terrorism in Syria. The prosecution was forced to abandon the case after it became clear that British intelligence had been arming the very same rebel groups

the defendant was charged with supporting. The defence argued the trial was an “affront to justice,” given that there was plenty of evidence the British state was providing “extensive support” to the armed Syrian opposition. It cited the example of MI6’s cooperation with the CIA in facilitating a “rat line” of arms transfers from Libya to the Syrian rebels in 2012, following the NATO-led toppling of the regime and the brutal murder of its leader, Muammar Gaddafi.

The government evidently viewed the contract to promote the Free Syrian Army as a holding operation until British military forces could participate openly, as it offered “the capability to *expand back* into the strategic space as and when the opportunity arises” [emphasis added.]

This was an open admission that British forces had been operating in Syria long before the government lost the 2013 vote.

In 2012, the Israeli website DEBKAF, which has close links to Israel’s military intelligence, suggested that SAS Commandos were inside Syria conducting covert operations alongside the insurgents. Britain was also providing intelligence from its Cyprus bases on Syrian regime movements to Turkey to be passed on to the Free Syrian Army—something the Ministry of Defence only confirmed in October 2014.

In June 2012, it was widely reported that the prospect of British Special Forces entering Syria on the ground or operating on the Turkish border close to Aleppo, was growing. In 2014, a BBC *Newsnight* team reported that the British military had drawn up plans in 2012 to train 100,000 Syrian rebel forces. It was rejected as too risky after discussion in both Britain and the US.

However, the only “support” that the government told the public about in 2012 was the supply of “non-lethal” equipment to the Islamist militias in Syria, including vehicles, trucks and VSATs (small satellite systems for data communications), and training to the Syrian opposition forces. Just months later, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that British military “advisers” were operating on Syria’s borders, while the Croatian press reported that Britain had been participating in a major US airlift of heavy arms to Syrian rebels through Zagreb since November 2012, in defiance of a European Union embargo on sending weapons to Syria.

Further indirect evidence of Britain’s role is provided by a heavily redacted August 2012 US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) report, published by the right-wing watchdog Judicial Watch. The report noted that the

US and its allies were supporting the armed insurgency in Syria knowing that it was dominated by Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaida in Iraq. The US knew that these forces wanted to establish a Salafist state in eastern Syria, and this was “exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime.”

Given London’s close relationship with Washington, it is inconceivable that Britain was not “one of the supporting powers,” behind the Islamists from the earliest days of the Syrian civil war, and the attempt to divide the country. The Saudis were widely reported to be arming these forces and Britain, as one of Riyadh’s main arms suppliers, was therefore directly involved.

In September 2014, Cameron said there was a case for airstrikes against ISIS, but acknowledged this would need parliament’s approval. Nevertheless, in July 2015, it emerged that British forces were taking part in airstrikes in Syria, alongside US and Canadian forces, without such approval.

The lies and subterfuge follow inexorably from the government’s commitment to wars of aggression, which have no popular mandate, in support of the financial elite’s predatory commercial interests in the oil-rich region. This underscores the political significance of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s refusal to insist on Labour MPs voting in line with Labour’s policy of opposing intervention in Syria and allowing a free vote on December 2 last year.

Giving Labour’s warmongers free rein—including allowing then Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn to sum up for the opposition in the debate with a speech applauded by the Conservatives—saw 66 Labour MPs vote with the government. By deliberately demobilising the substantial opposition within Labour’s membership to the right-wing, Corbyn’s actions both gave the Tories crucial cover for advancing their war plans and set the stage for the present efforts by the Blairites to remove him as leader and purge his supporters from the party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact