

Britain and France prepare military escalation in Syria

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Britain's ruling elite are making advanced preparations towards a major escalation of military operations in Syria.

Parliament met in an emergency three-hour session yesterday to accuse Russia of war crimes in Syria and lay the basis for Britain's involvement in establishing a no-fly zone and possibly sending ground forces into the war-torn country.

Global tensions over Syria are at a boiling point. As parliament met, Russian President Vladimir Putin cancelled a planned October 19 visit to France in response to the accusation made the previous day by French President Francois Hollande that Moscow was guilty of "war crimes" in Syria.

The Syrian army, with the support of Russia, have been attacking the east of Aleppo, where NATO's Al Qaeda-linked Islamist proxies in Syria are based. With its proxies facing defeat, Washington, backed by its international allies, is calling for the imposition of a no-fly zone in order to save them.

"The population [of Aleppo] is the victim of war crimes. Those who commit these acts will pay for this responsibility before the international court of justice," said Hollande.

Tensions have been ratcheted up ever since Washington, without any evidence, pinned responsibility on Moscow for an attack on a UN aid convoy and demanded that Russia and Syria ground their aircraft. Russia denies any involvement.

The UK parliamentary debate was initiated jointly by Conservative MP Andrew Mitchell and Labour's Alison McGovern, who co-chairs the Friends of Syria group and is chair of the main Blairite think-tank, Progress. The initiative was supported by former US commander in Iraq and ex-CIA Director David Petraeus.

Guardian, one of the main advocates of confronting Russia in Syria, noted that Mitchell "has been arguing for a no-fly zone for many months... In recent weeks some of Mitchell's advisers have developed this proposal into a call to track Russian jets from UK warships off the coast of Syria, and for a complete no-fly zone for Syrian helicopters over civilian areas. It has been argued that Syrian helicopters are doing all the damage with chemical, napalm and high explosive barrel bombs. One proposal has been to bomb air runways."

Speaking to BBC radio's *Today* programme ahead of the debate, Mitchell said, "What we are saying is very clear. No one wants to see a firefight with Russia, no one wants to shoot down a Russian plane."

The shooting down of the warplanes of the world's second nuclear power is precisely what Mitchell is advocating.

He continued, "But what we do say is that the international community has an avowed responsibility to protect and that protection must be exerted. If that means confronting Russian air power defensively, on behalf of the innocent people on the ground who we are trying to protect, then we should do that."

Asked if the UK should be involved in enforcing a no-fly zone, Mitchell responded, "I think that Britain should explore with its allies how it would enforce a no-fly zone."

In the debate, Mitchell provocatively compared Russia with fascist Germany and Italy. "The Russians are doing to the United Nations precisely what Italy and Germany did to the League of Nations in the 1930s, and they are doing to Aleppo precisely what the Nazis did to Guernica during the Spanish civil war," he said.

Mitchell railed against the anti-war sentiment that has grown as a result of the disastrous imperialist wars over

the past two decades. “The international community faces a choice,” he asserted. “Are we so cowed and so poleaxed by recent history in Iraq and Afghanistan that we are incapable now of taking action?”

The debate saw Labour’s warmongers compete with the Tories in displays of handwringing over the tragic fate of the Syrian people in order to justify heightened military aggression.

Labour’s official response came from Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry, appointed at the weekend by newly elected leader Jeremy Corbyn. Opposing a no-fly zone, she said, “I believe that in a multi-layered, multifaceted civil war such as that in Syria, the last thing that we need is more parties bombing. We need a ceasefire and for people to draw back.”

From then on Thornberry bent with the prevailing political winds. After being heckled by Labour MP Ben Bradshaw, who demanded Thornberry describe Russia’s actions as “war crimes”, she replied, “The actions of the Russians can well be seen as war crimes”, adding that there were, however, also “the war crimes of the jihadis.” Thornberry called on the government to “support French efforts to ensure that more initiatives are taken to bring the parties to international justice.”

The evening prior to the debate, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn convened a meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party to make yet another appeal for unity with the Blairite warmongers. Instead he was denounced for refusing to sanction action against Russia. According to the *Guardian*, “MPs said Corbyn referred to an attack that was ‘apparently’ carried out by the Russians.”

The newspaper cited Angela Smith MP, who said, “It is deeply concerning that Jeremy is unwilling to face up to the role that Putin’s Russia is playing in Syria. The recent criminal atrocities committed in Aleppo make the case for an effective international response overwhelming and Labour needs to show moral leadership on what is an intolerable situation.”

Corbyn’s spokesman later stated that he acknowledged that the evidence “appears to show that Russia was involved in the bombing, if not Russia the Syrian airforce, and all evidence appears to show it was a war crime.” But Corbyn “opposes all forms of foreign intervention in the conflict,” he added.

During the debate, Labour’s Ann Clwyd commended the *Guardian*’s coverage of Syria and demanded to know, “Where is the rage? Where are the demonstrations that we have seen on so many previous occasions...I want to see—I challenge the people listening to this debate—2 million, 3 million or 4 million people outside the Russian embassy day after day.”

Clwyd was a staunch advocate of the 2003 war against Iraq. The political editor of Rupert Murdoch’s *The Sun*, Trevor Kavanagh, praised her role in supposedly swinging public opinion behind support for war, while Blair made her his Special Envoy on Human Rights in Iraq.

Clwyd’s call was echoed by Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, who called on the Stop the War Coalition to organise a demonstration in London against Russia.

Johnson at this stage ruled out support for a no-fly zone, stating it would be impossible to enforce “unless we are prepared to shoot down warplanes.” However, the military options being considered by the imperialist powers were outlined by retired British General Sir Richard Shirreff in an interview in the *Daily Telegraph*. The former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander of NATO said that British troops should “play a major role” in training professional armed forces in Syria to oppose Assad. “To train properly you’ve got to be able to commit troops, because the whole principle of training other armies is that you live alongside them and if necessary you’ve got to be prepared to fight alongside them, or at least advise them.”

He warned, “[B]e under no illusions about how difficult imposing a no fly zone is. The Syrians have very effective Russian supplied air defence systems and that will require a major effort to suppress it.”



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