

Under US instruction, UK foreign secretary abandons visit to Russia

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Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson was instructed by Washington to cancel a scheduled trip to Moscow Monday, to meet with his counterpart, Sergei Lavrov.

Instead, he was tasked by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in a phone call Saturday with securing a “clear and co-ordinated message to the Russians” over Syria. This message, dictated by the Trump administration, is to be given at today and Tuesday’s G7 Foreign Ministers meeting in Lucca, Italy of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Britain and the US.

Johnson was left embarrassed for a second time in as many days, after publicly admitting that Tillerson had told him not to go for talks in Moscow that would have coincided with the Secretary of State’s own visit later this week.

Johnson wrote in a statement that he had discussed “in detail” his plans with Tillerson and they had agreed the American should go to Moscow first so that he would “deliver [a] clear and coordinated message to the Russians.”

Johnson will instead attend the G7 foreign ministers meeting in Italy Monday and Tuesday, where he will try to build a consensus for demands to Russian President Vladimir Putin to pull his troops out of Syria and end his support for President Bashar al-Assad.

Johnson justified the cancellation of what would have been the first trip to Russia by a UK foreign secretary in five years by declaring that “Developments in Syria”—the April 4 chemical attack on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun—“have changed the situation fundamentally.”

This is bluster on Johnson’s part. What changed the situation fundamentally is the Conservative government’s desire to be on message with the Trump administration, as it has moved to a position of

demanding regime change and preparing a military offensive to that end.

The intention to remove Assad was signalled by the unilateral April 6 attack on the Syrian government’s Al Shayrat airfield involving 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles. Earlier that day, Johnson had also failed to keep pace with the shift in the Trump administration’s line of collaboration with Moscow and Damascus in ensuring the defeat of Islamic State (ISIS).

Speaking to reporters in Sarajevo, Johnson opposed unilateral action, insisting, “It is very important to try first to get out a UN resolution” condemning Syria in order to place maximum pressure on Russian President Vladimir Putin to rein in Assad. This was also the position of Prime Minister Theresa May. Hours later, May was informed by phone that the US was about to commence bombing and immediately fell into line.

Speaking on Johnson’s decision to the *Daily Telegraph*, a Foreign Office source said: “It has been noticeable this week that both Tillerson and Trump have said there is no future for Assad.” Johnson would be “hitting the phone” to ensure a “very strong and very hard-hitting” G7 statement over Russia’s involvement in Syria is agreed, the source added.

That same day, Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the United Nations, declared, “There’s not any sort of option where a political solution is going to happen with Assad at the head of the regime.”

On cue, Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon wrote an opinion piece in the *Sunday Times* accusing President Vladimir Putin’s government of political responsibility for the civilian deaths in the attack on Khan Sheikhoun. “By proxy Russia is responsible for every civilian death last week. If Russia wants to be absolved of responsibility for future attacks, Vladimir Putin needs to enforce commitments, to dismantle

Assad's chemical weapons arsenal for good, and to get fully engaged with the UN peacekeeping progress," he demanded. "Russia must show the resolve necessary to bring this regime to heel."

Moscow is openly contemptuous of Britain's bluster. The foreign ministry said there was "no need to talk to the UK," as it is "in the shadow" of its partners. The cancellation of Johnson's visit "once again confirms doubts about the added value of dialogue with the British, who don't have their own position on the majority of current issues."

The Russian Embassy in London tweeted that if Putin was given an ultimatum, the outcome would be either a "war of clowns, war of muses, a conventional war or mix of the above".

Johnson's embarrassment occasioned some *schadenfreude* from the Scottish National Party, the Liberal Democrats and Labour.

The SNP's foreign affairs spokesman Alex Salmond said Johnson looked like "some sort of mini-me" and is in "deep political trouble." Tim Farron, the Liberal Democrats leader, said, "Boris has revealed himself to be a poodle of Washington, having his diary managed from across the pond."

Labour's Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell told Sky News that Johnson "should be in Moscow now. ... He should be saying to the Russians just how appalling this situation is and the role they should play. We have got to be frank with them and we shouldn't just allow the Americans to go off and do that, we should be doing that ourselves."

The tenor of McDonnell's remarks points to the pathetic character of such political posturing by the opposition parties.

There is no substantial disagreement with the Tories from the fanatically pro-interventionist Liberal Democrats, while McDonnell is making clear once again that he and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn will not oppose a vote in support of military action by their MPs, should one be called.

The government has not so far raised the possibility of the UK launching its own air strikes against Assad, which would in all likelihood need the support of MPs. There remains the example of 2013, when Parliament rejected a bombing campaign in Syria. But this time, a majority of Labour MPs have indicated their support for extended action citing their inevitable

"humanitarian" pretexts and justifications.



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