

UK: Demands grow for May government to hold debate on Syria attack

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Theresa May's Conservative government is in deeper crisis than ever over her decision to take part in Saturday's US-led bombing of Syria together with France.

She faces criticism for having acted against Syria without parliamentary approval. The precedent requiring a parliamentary debate and vote for what was clearly an act of war was set by Tony Blair's Labour government over Iraq in 2003.

Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn demanded that either Parliament break its Easter recess or that any decision on military action be delayed until it reconvened. So did the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales) and the Greens.

The decision to bomb Syria was in fact made long ago, in collaboration with and under instructions from the US. Corbyn was able to taunt May on Friday, hours before bombing began, that "The government appears to be waiting for instructions from President Donald Trump on how to proceed."

However, on Sunday, May was forced to issue the legal advice she says authorised four Royal Air Force Tornados to launch eight "bunker busting" Storm Shadow missiles at what was described as a former missile base 15 miles west of Homs.

The advice is a legal travesty. It does not cite a single international authority to back its assertion that "The UK is permitted under international law, on an exceptional basis, to take measures in order to alleviate overwhelming humanitarian suffering ..."

No such provision exists in any international treaty authorising military action against another state. Dismantling the British government's advice, former British ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray wrote Sunday, "all the relevant texts say that an attack on another state is illegal without authorisation of the UN Security Council under Chapter VII of the UN Charter."

Murray added, "Nor does the government quote any judgement of the International Court of Justice, International Criminal Court or any other international legal authority."

May is due to make a formal statement to Parliament today on the airstrikes, but no vote is to take place. May's coalition partners, the Democratic Unionist Party, whose 10 MPs allow the Tories to remain in office as a minority government, backed the UK air raids.

Were a vote to have been held in Parliament on military action, it is likely to be authorised, given that May can count on most of her own MPs and between 30 and 50 Blairite Labour MPs. In December 2015, British fighter jets—under the pretext of targeting ISIS positions—began bombing raids in Syria. This came immediately after 66 Labour MPs backed the then-David Cameron Tory government, after being given a free vote on the issue by Corbyn.

However, such is the unpopularity of the decision to attack Syria—with polls showing only 20 percent support—that May could not risk reconvening Parliament before the event even if Corbyn once again gave his right-wing a free pass.

On Sunday, Corbyn told the BBC's Andrew Marr that he favoured a "war powers act" that would constitutionally force future UK governments to seek approval from Parliament.

May's woes are made worse because the handful of Tory MPs who insisted that Parliament was given a vote are influential figures.

Julian Lewis, chair of the House of Commons defence committee, said last Wednesday, "When we are contemplating military intervention in other people's conflicts, Parliament ought to be consulted."

Ken Clarke, the longest-serving MP, warned of the dangers of a move to authoritarian rule, stating, "In a modern parliamentary democracy, you've got to have

parliamentary approval if you have a planned policy decision to launch a military attack of any significant size. All this stuff about invoking the royal prerogative so that on treaties or going to war the Cabinet is a kind of autocracy is, I think, extremely dangerous.”

Clarke was responding to the focus placed by May, Foreign Minister Boris Johnson and others on the recent nature of the 2003 precedent and insistence that the prime minister must reassert her constitution prerogative. But Blair was forced to take this step because of the massive opposition to war against Iraq and widespread scepticism in the “dodgy dossiers” about “weapons of mass destruction” cooked up to sanction war.

Opposition to war with Syria, bringing with it the danger of a confrontation with Russia, is equally universal as is disbelief in the claims that May is motivated by humanitarian concerns over the unproven use of chemical weapons in Douma.

Leading figures within the military also expressed dismay that the “evidence” justifying military stakes was nonexistent.

Just hours before the Saturday’s bombardment, Lord West, the former head of the Royal Navy, said, “I think we need unequivocal proof that this chemical attack was done by Assad’s forces. I’m not at all convinced at the moment we have unequivocal proof. All of the reports are coming from people like the White Helmets, who have a track record of actually doing propaganda for the opposition forces in Syria. The World Health Organisation reports are coming from doctors working in Douma who are also part of the opposition there.”

Major-General Jonathan Shaw, who commanded UK forces in Iraq in 2006, asked during an interview on Sky News, “What possible motive could have triggered Syria to launch a chemical attack at this time and this place? You know, the Syrians are winning! And don’t take my word for it—take the American military’s word for it!”

Shaw, clearly referring to Douma, continued, “And then suddenly you get ...”

At this point Sky News’s Samantha Washington cut in, insisting, “We do need to leave it there.”

To underscore the fraud being perpetrated, the attack on Syria took place immediately prior to the arrival in Douma of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to carry out an inspection of the alleged attack site. Innumerable social media messages denounced the attack launched by the US, UK and France as a means of pre-empting the investigation. Russian military personnel, who investigated the alleged

site of the attack last week, found no evidence of chemical substances in the area or any traces of chemical poisoning. As of last Thursday, Russian military police have been deployed in Douma and are guarding the site of the alleged attack.

A key element in whipping up anti-Russia hysteria in preparation for the military attack on Russia’s ally, Assad, was the entirely manufactured claims by the May government that Moscow used “military grade nerve agent” to try and assassinate former double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia in Salisbury on March 4.

It was amid the unravelling of this fabrication that, on April 7, the chemical attack on Douma was reported by the UK-funded Islamist group, the White Helmets. Their say so provided the *casus belli* for Saturday’s attack on Syria.

Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov directly accused the “special services of a country, which is now seeking to be in the first ranks of the Russophobic campaign” of involvement “in this staged event” by the White Helmets.

This weekend Lavrov stated that the nerve agent used against the Skripals contained not only novichok, but an agent known as BZ that has never been produced by the Soviet Union or Russia.

A chemical lab in the Swiss town of Spiez sent a sample by the OPCW of the substance used in Salisbury had concluded it had traces of the BZ agent, which has the effect of temporarily “disabling a person. The effect is achieved within 30-50 minutes and lasts up to four days.”

This was not included in the OPCW report. Lavrov said the Spiez report mentioned no nerve agents by name, including novichok, but instead gave a long chemical formula. Citing the report, dated March 27, Lavrov added, “This formulation was in the inventory of the United States, Britain and other NATO states.”



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