

Starmer government refuses parliamentary vote on UK involvement in Iran war

Robert Stevens
23 March 2026

On Monday evening, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer convened an emergency COBRA meeting to discuss the expanding war on Iran and its devastating impact on the economy. The meeting was attended by the chancellor, foreign secretary, energy secretary and the governor of the Bank of England.

COBRA meetings are convened to respond to national emergencies. The latest was the third since the US-Israeli onslaught on Iran began almost a month ago. It took place as the claims of the crisis-ridden Labour government that Britain is not participating in the war on Iran have unravelled.

Last Friday, the government designated military action against Iran “collective self-defence.” This allows strikes against Iranian missile systems threatening shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, not just missiles directly threatening British personnel or allies. It replaced a policy, supposedly operative since March 1, allowing the US to use British bases only for a “specific and limited defensive purpose.”

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi warned that London’s actions “will definitely be considered as participation in aggression... we reserve our inherent right to defend the country’s sovereignty and independence.”

President Donald Trump later issued an ultimatum on his social media platform threatening to wipe out the infrastructure upon which 90 million Iranians depend.

A government statement on Sunday confirmed that Britain would do nothing to prevent such an attack. Sky News broadcaster Trevor Phillips asked government minister Steve Reed, “What is the government’s position on this 48-hour deadline? Are we saying to the Americans, ‘No, don’t do this because this is escalating the situation,’ or are we simply standing on the sidelines waiting to see what happens?”

Reed replied, “I think you need to ask President Trump about the things that President Trump is talking about.”

This took place amid a deluge of media attacks on Iran, following a claim by the Wall Street Journal that Tehran had attempted to hit the joint UK-US military base of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean with intercontinental missiles.

The UK media predictably lined up behind a spokesman for the far-right Israeli government, screaming that if Iran was able to strike Chagos, then what was to stop it striking London and other European capitals.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baqaei denied that Iran had fired a missile at Diego Garcia.

In an interview with the BBC’s Laura Kuenssberg, in which Reed declared, “We are not going to be dragged into this war. We will not see this country dragged into this war,” Kuenssberg responded, “That’s not quite right though, is it? Our involvement is increasing. We are getting more involved whether you like it or not. Our RAF jets have been shooting down more drones. We are now giving the Americans additional permission to do more.”

Kuenssberg then asked Reed, “Isn’t it time for a vote in Parliament on what the UK is doing?”

He replied that this would be unnecessary, as “it would be unprecedented to call a vote in Parliament on defending British people and British assets... There is no precedent for a vote in Parliament for defending British people.”

This statement speaks to a government utterly hostile to democratic norms and accountability. The fact that Reed, who is the housing secretary (!), was chosen to make such an astonishing statement—impacting the lives of literally millions of people in Iran, Britain, and

internationally—speaks volumes.

Notwithstanding all the repeated claims that Britain is not being “dragged into a war”—a phrase Reed repeated four times to Phillips and six times to Kuenssberg—the only meaning of his statement is that the population, even via their supposed parliamentary representatives, can have no say over a Labour government once again involving the UK in an illegal war.

Reed is to the right of even Tony Blair, who took Britain into the US-led, illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. Blair, who felt unable to cite Royal Prerogative to launch a deeply unpopular war, called a parliamentary vote on participation on March 18, which he won by 412 votes in favour to 149 against, confident that most MPs would join him in defying overwhelming public opposition.

There still remains no formal legal requirement that Parliament must approve military action, but the ensuing political catastrophe around the Iraq war—which saw the resignation of Blair four years later—established, as a parliamentary convention, that governments would seek approval before launching major combat operations. Votes were held on British participation in the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 and on proposed military action against Syria in 2013.

The Starmer government can only proceed in backing the US against Iran because it relies on the support of a Parliament that acts even more firmly than in 2003 as a single party of imperialist war.

On Monday afternoon, Starmer appeared before Parliament’s Liaison Committee of MPs. The main criticism of Starmer was from MPs demanding an even more aggressive military posture and that he commit to a rapid escalation of military spending.

For the last month, a substantial section of the US’s heavy bomber fleet has been operating from the Royal Air Force Fairford base in Gloucestershire, launching strikes against Iranian targets. Yet Starmer maintained a straight face as he told the committee that “This is not our war, and we are not getting dragged into this war.” He had maintained “a divide” between Britain and Washington over this, and UK military bases were only being used “for the purposes of collective self-defence.”

Conservative MP Bernard Jenkin, a former shadow defence minister, attacked the government, saying,

“We are already at war, and we need to be in a war-fighting mentality to deal with the emergencies that we’re facing.” This approach “smacks of enormous complacency,” he said, asking why “the government is not just getting on with it.”

Declared opposition to the war has come from a tiny minority of MPs and is led by Jeremy Corbyn—the figurehead of the Stop the War Coalition and leader of Your Party, who centres his bankrupt programme on futile appeals to complicit governments to oppose war.

On March 4, Corbyn put forward the Military Action (Parliamentary Approval) Bill, a private member’s bill, co-sponsored by just 11 MPs, which has no chance of being passed in a 650-seat chamber stuffed with warmongers. Parliament’s own website notes that the Second Reading of the Bill is not scheduled to take place until April 17, “although the House of Commons is not expected to be sitting on that date”!

Nowhere in a Bill of just 81 words does it even refer to the war on Iran, let alone describe it as illegal. It merely requests that there be “parliamentary approval for the deployment of UK armed forces and military equipment for armed conflict; to require parliamentary approval for the granting of permission by Ministers for use of UK military bases and equipment by other nations for armed conflict; to require the withdrawal of that permission in circumstances where parliamentary approval is not granted.”

Even this is negated by Corbyn’s caveat that the Bill still “provides for certain exemptions from these requirements” where necessary.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)