

Labour split over UK Syria intervention

By Julie Hyland
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The Labour Party leadership is deeply divided over whether to back British intervention in Syria.

Prime Minister David Cameron presented his case for military action in parliament Thursday. The British government is anxious to begin operations. This is not only in order to reverse the humiliating defeat it suffered in August 2013, when parliament vetoed intervention. Above all, it wants to ensure that it is able to stake its claim in the US-led carve-up of Syria and Iraq now underway.

Cameron hopes to be able to hold a vote on intervention next week. But to do so with an expectation of winning, he has to be sure that he has the backing of at least 30 Labour MPs, who would be voting in defiance of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's stated opposition to military involvement.

Even before Cameron had set out his case, a number of Labour MPs had made clear they would back the government.

On Monday, several publicly lined up to praise the government's Strategic Defence Review. On Tuesday, 14 Labour MPs voted in favour of the renewal of Britain's Trident nuclear programme. This was in defiance of Corbyn's instruction that they should stay away from the vote, instigated by the Scottish National Party with the express purpose of exposing divisions in Labour's ranks. A further six MPs abstained.

Shadow Defence Secretary Maria Eagle is only one of several leading Labourites to have publicly supported Conservative claims that Corbyn is not "fit for office" because he has said that, as prime minister, he would not "press the button" to fire nuclear weapons. In the reactionary environs of the Labour Party, a willingness to commit mass murder is considered a badge of honour, ranking alongside support for austerity, "law and order" and any other policy associated with the right.

Several members of the shadow cabinet are said to be

furiously at suggestions that Corbyn might try to impose a three-line whip in opposition to bombing Syria. Shadow Foreign secretary Hilary Benn has said that he is minded to support the government, as has deputy party leader Tom Watson, Shadow Education Secretary Lucy Powell and the Shadow Lord Chancellor Lord Falconer—leaving Corbyn in a minority in his own cabinet.

Labour backbenchers Fiona Mactaggart and John Spellar have publicly called on Corbyn to resign, arguing that his opposition to intervention is "unsustainable."

Yet again Corbyn's response has been to try and avoid any conflict with the right wing, while deliberately downplaying the danger of a third world war that has been set in motion through the Syrian conflict.

In Monday's debate on the Strategic Defence Review, Corbyn said nothing about the preparations for intervention against Syria and made no mention of Turkey's downing of the Russian military jet. Instead, he sought to pitch himself as a concerned defender of the military and national security, leaving Cameron to remark with scorn on his apparent volte-face.

No action was taken against the Labour MPs voting in favour of Trident's renewal.

Now, Corbyn is attempting to bypass support for the government's line in his shadow cabinet by appealing to the Parliamentary Labour Party. In a letter to the PLP issued Thursday evening, he agreed that "our national security must be front and centre stage." But he said that he did not "believe the prime minister's current proposal for airstrikes in Syria will protect our security and therefore cannot support it."

Corbyn's mealy-mouthed protestations have nothing to do with genuine opposition to imperialist war. They concern solely the effectiveness of military action. Not once has the Labour leader made an appeal to the mass

anti-war sentiment that exists among working people, much less alerted them to the catastrophic implications of the war drive now underway. Instead he has cancelled all public appearances, including campaigning in the Oldham West by-election.

This is no accident. Corbyn is opposed to mobilising workers and youth against the Tory government and their policies of imperialist war and austerity. His primary concern is to try and cut a deal with his right wing opponents so as to preserve Labour's authority.

Whether he is able to achieve this remains to be seen. With the possibility that several of his cabinet may resign, Corbyn is said to be considering allowing a free vote. But even this might not be enough to ensure that Cameron is able to carry the day. The prime minister is reportedly taking soundings over the weekend as to whether he can be certain of a majority before he decides to hold a vote.

In August 2013, 30 Tory MPs rebelled against the government, helping ensure its defeat. This time round, it is thought that their numbers have been halved. Nonetheless, Cameron's case for British intervention is so transparently bogus that it is being compared with Tony Blair's 2003 "dodgy dossier" of fabricated intelligence on Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction".

In particular, Cameron's claim that there are 70,000 "moderate" Syrian opposition fighters who can be relied on as pro-western ground forces is openly ridiculed.

The US and its allies have facilitated the growth of Islamic State and other terror groups, utilising them as a proxy force in their efforts to overthrow the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and secure their geo-strategic interests in the region.

Numerous commentators have pointed out that Cameron's estimate—supplied by the Joint Intelligence Committee, that was also responsible for the Iraq dossier—includes known jihadist groups, such as the Al-Qaeda aligned al-Nusra Front. According to Craig Murray, former British ambassador to Uzbekistan, "Cameron is in serious trouble at Westminster after overreaching himself by the claim that there are 70,000 'moderate rebels' willing to take up the ground war with Isis. Quite literally not one single MP believes him. There are those who believe the lie is justified. But even they know it is a lie."

Murray implies that defence sources are among those

challenging Cameron's claim.

Several Tory MPs have challenged the prime minister. Peter Lilley dismissed Cameron's figure as comprising "a rag-bag group of clans and tribal forces with no coherent force", while John Baron said it was "extremely optimistic."

Conservative MP, Dr Julian Lewis, who is chairman of the defence select committee, has tabled a question to the prime minister as to where this "magical" number was derived from. Lewis made clear the differences that persist within the British bourgeoisie, especially as regards "credible ground forces."

Without certainty on this issue, sections of the ruling elite are concerned that they could be cut out of the division of the Syrian spoils. To this end, some argue that British imperialist interests are best achieved through a deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime of Russian oligarchs.

Lewis argued, "The reality is if you want to defeat Isil/Daesh, you need to have the regular Syrian army as part of the force that's going to do it and that's where the prime minister has a sticking point but he still can't bring himself to forge an alliance with the Russians and their client Assad because, of course, they are... so unpleasant.

"But Churchill, who we are constantly told we must emulate, did precisely that with Stalin and the Bolsheviks in World War II. Sometimes the best you can do is choose the lesser of two evils."

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