

Western foreign ministers to meet in London to discuss Syria intervention

By Robert Stevens
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UK Foreign Minister Boris Johnson has called a meeting of European Union foreign ministers Sunday to discuss the “military options” of the imperialist powers in Syria’s civil war. Also attending will be US Secretary of State John Kerry, who travels to London after meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Switzerland.

Johnson confirmed the London meeting when questioned Thursday by parliament’s Foreign Affairs Select Committee. He said it would also discuss plans for the planned military assault on Mosul that is being prepared by the imperialist powers. Mosul is the main Iraqi city controlled by the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) militia.

On Syria Johnson said, “It is right now that we should be looking again at the more kinetic options, the military options.”

Sunday’s meeting is extraordinary given that Johnson was amongst the leading proponents of quitting the EU in the June referendum on UK membership. But the surprise 52 percent vote to leave has only intensified the efforts by Britain’s ruling elite to convince Washington that it can still play a lead role in bringing the European powers into line. “Certainly you can’t do anything without a coalition with the Americans,” Johnson stated. “I think we are still a pretty long day’s march from getting that, but that doesn’t mean that discussions aren[t going on, because they certainly are.”

Before the Brexit vote, Johnson was speaking in favour of a US-Russian brokered alliance to bring about a ceasefire in Syria. Now he is bellicose in condemning Moscow for “war crimes”. Backing US efforts to isolate Russia and its ally—the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad—he told the parliamentary committee that the US and its allies were

preparing to end participation in the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), which currently includes Russia and Iran.

“It [the ISSG] has not worked. The last session was extremely acrimonious. It turned into a slanging match in which the Iranians came to the assistance of the Russians. The conversation got nowhere,” said Johnson.

However, Johnson did not openly support demands for imposing a no-fly zone in Syria. A spokesman for Prime Minister Theresa May said that all options under discussion came with “lots of issues... There are no plans for military action.”

For such plans to be openly tabled requires a major political effort to shift public opinion from the present overwhelming hostility to what would involve a direct confrontation with a nuclear power.

How close such a confrontation is was confirmed by two related admissions this week. The Ministry of Defence said it had conducted 1,066 strikes against ISIS in Iraq over the past two years and in Syria since December, while an anonymous source from the UK’s Permanent Joint Headquarters told the Sunday Times that UK Royal Air Force (RAF) pilots over Syria have been instructed to shoot down “hostile” Russian warplanes if necessary. “If a pilot is fired on or believes he is about to be fired on [by a Russian jet], he can defend himself,” the source said. “We now have a situation where a single pilot, irrespective of nationality, can have a strategic impact on future events.”

Johnson said the British parliament took a “big step backwards from intervention when it voted against military action in 2013. We vacated the space that has been occupied by the Russians.” That vote was taken under conditions of huge opposition to war in Syria and

warnings by senior military figures as to its efficacy, which scuppered plans by the US for direct military intervention against the Assad government.

The 2013 decision had to be reversed, said Johnson, stating, “Most people—I think including John Kerry—feel that the process of discussion with the Russians has basically run out of road... The mood of the House of Commons has changed from 2013. Whether that means we can get a coalition for a more kinetic action now I cannot prophesy.”

Johnson’s statement was intended as an appeal to Labour’s right wing. Following their unsuccessful putsch against Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his anti-militarist stance, Johnson was demanding that they play the lead role in whipping up support for military intervention in Syria.

This was the occasion for a carefully choreographed exchange between Johnson and Labour Party MP Ann Clwyd in parliament. Clwyd was among the staunchest advocates of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In 2011, she voted for the enforcement of a no-fly zone over Libya, which was utilised by the imperialist powers to topple the government of Muammar Gaddafi, culminating in his brutal murder. She is now calling for protest demonstrations to be held outside the Russian Embassy in London on the basis that Moscow is responsible for the Syrian crisis.

In response to one question from Clwyd, Johnson said that Assad, Russia and Iran were perpetrating a “gross crime against humanity,” in Aleppo. Asked by Clwyd which “policy options” were open to the UK in Syria, Johnson invoked the “humanitarian” crisis in Aleppo, saying it was necessary to “intensify actions on some of the key players in the Assad regime and on the Russian as well.”

Labour’s right wing has lined up to condemn Corbyn for his failure to sanction military action against Assad. This is despite Corbyn authorising a free vote on British military air strikes on Syria last December, with 66 Labour MPs voting with the government. Last week Corbyn described the actions of Russia in Syria as “war crimes”.

However, on Tuesday Corbyn’s closest adviser, Seamus Milne, stated, “The focus on Russian atrocities or Syrian army atrocities, which is absolutely correct, sometimes diverts attention from other atrocities that are taking place. Independent assessments are that there

have been very large scale civilian casualties as a result of US-led coalition bombing.” He added, “There are several cases of large numbers of civilian deaths in single attacks and there hasn’t been so much attention on those atrocities.”

In response, the Blairites and government representatives denounced Milne and Corbyn. Labour MP Kevan Jones, a former shadow defence minister and supporter of the Iraq War, said, “Corbyn should completely distance himself from this,” adding that Milne was “clearly an apologist for Putin and his regime.”

John Woodcock, another Blairite and a leading figure in the recent attempted coup against Corbyn, said, “This absurdity seems like a deliberate provocation, unworthy of our leader and our party.”

It is under these conditions that a broad swath of the pseudo-left has moved to demand that Corbyn reverse his opposition to stepped up military action. Around 180 members of the Corbyn-supporting Momentum activist network, other Labour members, trade union officials and the Alliance for Workers Liberty group issued an open letter demanding that the Labour leader “say clearly and unequivocally that the actions of Assad and Russia in Syria are barbaric war crimes, and that you will seek to end them, and to hold their perpetrators to account.”

The letter demands that Corbyn “lend your wholehearted support to practical measures to support civilians and pressure the regime to end its attacks, such as airdrops of aid to besieged civilians by British military forces... ‘Food not bombs’ should be the rallying cry, not ‘Hands off Syria’.”

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