

British cabinet agrees on “action” against Syria, bypassing Parliament

By Julie Hyland
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Britain will “take action” against Syria, cabinet ministers unanimously agreed Thursday evening, based on fraudulent claims of the Assad government’s responsibility for an alleged chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburb of Douma April 7.

Prime Minister Theresa May convened her senior ministers with the express purpose of signing off on a major escalation in the seven-year US-led war for regime change in Syria. Having assembled in the manner of a criminal cabal, ministers skulked past waiting reporters after the two-hour meeting. No one would say a word about what had been discussed. May herself declined to make a statement.

It was left to a government spokesperson to issue a perfunctory statement just before 9 p.m., announcing a decision that will worsen an already catastrophic situation in the Middle East and which threatens a military confrontation involving no less than four nuclear powers—the US, Britain and France against Russia.

The same hoary lie of “humanitarian” intervention used to justify wars of aggression in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya was wheeled out again. The spokesman said the need to alleviate “humanitarian” suffering had decided the cabinet “it was vital that the use of chemical weapons did not go unchallenged.”

Assad has a “track record of the use of chemical weapons,” he asserted, and cabinet agreed it “is highly likely” the “regime is responsible for Saturday’s attack.”

“Highly likely” is the stock phrase employed by Britain to assert Russian responsibility for the alleged poisoning by nerve agent of double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia Skripal. As in that case, it signals that the government is fabricating evidence and dissembling to suit its war agenda.

“Cabinet agreed the prime minister should continue to work with allies in the United States and France to coordinate an international response,” the spokesman said.

No details were forthcoming of what this response would consist of or when it is to be expected. The *Financial Times* cited “some British officials believe the western alliance could strike in days, with one predicting ‘a busy weekend’.”

It reported that eight Tornado aircraft and six Typhoon fighters were on standby at RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus, from which “they could be deployed to fire Storm Shadow missiles that have a range of more than 500 km.”

Former UK military commanders “said it was more likely” Royal Navy submarines carrying cruise missiles would be used to strike Syrian targets.

Crucially for May, as the newspaper noted, “A weekend attack would preclude a parliamentary vote before military action starts.” Parliament is currently in recess and is not due to assemble before Monday.

The May government, mired in crisis over Britain’s exit from the European Union, cannot afford even the semblance of democratic accountability for fear of the possible outcome.

A minority government, without any authority or legitimacy, it is kept in power by Northern Ireland’s Democratic Unionist Party.

In August 2013, then prime minister David Cameron—fearful of public opposition to British involvement in an intended attack on Syria—allowed a parliamentary vote only to be defeated.

It is to avoid a similar debacle that May is seeking to use the cabinet meeting to justify bypassing Parliament.

May is probably assured of the backing of much of her parliamentary party. As for the DUP, while it voted

against strikes on Syria in 2013, it supported military action subsequently against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Its current position is unknown.

Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party, however, have demanded a vote in Parliament.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn said he opposed any military action against Syria, stating “more bombing, more killing, more war will not save life.” There “has to be a proper process of consultation,” he said. “Cabinet on its own should not be making this decision.”

He added, “Russia, America, the European Union, all the neighbouring countries, Iran, Saudi Arabia have got to be involved in ensuring there is a real ceasefire and a political process that does give hope to the people of Syria in the future.

“The dangers of bombing now, which could escalate the conflict beyond belief. ... Just imagine the scenario if an American missile shoots down a Russian plane or vice versa. Where do we go from there?”

Corbyn’s statements have seen him denounced as a Kremlin stooge by Tory minister Sajid Javid, among others.

May can rely on the support of Labour’s right wing, comprising 30 to 50 of the party’s MPs, who make no secret of their hostility to Corbyn and their own pro-war agenda. Even before the cabinet met, Tony Blair demanded Britain take military action in Syria, arguing that failure to support the US “is a policy with consequences.” Blair, who was responsible for the “dodgy dossier” used to justify pre-emptive war against Iraq in 2003, advised May that she did not need to seek Parliament’s approval for such a course.

Liberal Democrat leader Vince Cable said the government “must present the objectives of any proposed action to Parliament. A unilateral response by any country, outside of a wider strategy, without allies, is not the way forward.”

But Cable intimated that if presented with such a “strategy,” Liberal Democrat MPs could back the government. As part of the Conservative-led coalition 2010-2015, the Liberal Democrats officially supported military intervention in Libya (2011) and Syria (2013).

However, even if this gives May a majority, her primary concern is not with parliamentary arithmetic. Whatever oppositional vote was taken in Parliament, it

would be a pale expression of the widespread public opposition to war that all parties know exists.

This anti-war sentiment has only grown since 2003 and 2013. The first YouGov poll on public attitude to military strikes on Syria showed Britons are overwhelmingly opposed, by two to one. Of 1,600 people surveyed, just 22 percent supported air strikes—less than the 25 percent that backed Cameron’s desired intervention in 2013. Some 43 percent said they were against and 34 percent were unsure of the best course of action.

Meanwhile, almost 40 prominent individuals, including academics, actors and artists, wrote to the *Guardian* to oppose war. The letter stated that military intervention “as proposed by Trump, May or Macron, is not the solution and can only extend the appalling suffering of the people of Syria.”

As well as risking Middle East war, there was the “possibility of direct confrontation between nuclear-armed powers,” it said.

The signatories, who included actors Mark Rylance and Francesca Martinez, musician Brian Eno, three Labour MPs and representatives of the Stop the War Coalition, stated, “It is quite wrong to argue, as Tony Blair does, that these attacks are the price of non-intervention. Foreign military intervention from all sides, including from the UK government, has only served to deepen and prolong the war in Syria.”

Peter Ford, the former ambassador to Syria and director of the British/Syria Society, has been particularly vocal in opposing what he describes as the rush into a “dangerous conflict” based on “contested evidence” supplied by “Islamist militants.”

Asked what the outcome would be if the government refused to allow Parliament a vote before military intervention, he warned that in that case May “will make the day for Jeremy Corbyn who will make hay if and when it transpires that the evidence for the attacks doesn’t bear out.”

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