

U.K. Parliamentarians Challenge Queen's Perpetual War Policy

by Carl Osgood

July 15—A significant faction of the British political establishment is not at all comfortable with the notion of a Hundred Years War in the Middle East, particularly when such a conflict presents the threat of drawing the U.S. and Russia into a global, thermonuclear confrontation. This was borne out by the debate that took place in the House of Commons on July 11, on a motion calling on the government of Prime Minister David Cameron to abstain from making a decision to provide arms to the Syrian opposition, without first putting the question to a full debate and a vote in the Parliament.

The motion, which carried by a vote of 114 to 1, was supported by members from all three parties; and the debate took on, not only Cameron's policy, but also that of the Queen's favorite, former Prime Minister Tony Blair. While the vote was considered non-binding, the *Daily Telegraph* reported today that Cameron has dropped plans to arm the Syrian rebels, in part, because of counsel from senior figures in the Conservative Party, including the Tory whips, who told him there is little prospect of winning a vote in the Commons on arming the rebels.

Just a few days before the debate, on July 8, Blair appeared on BBC Radio 4's *Today* program to call for military intervention in the Syrian conflict. "Personally I think we should at least consider, and consider actively, a no-fly zone in Syria," he said. "A refusal to engage, as you see from what's happening in Syria at the moment, where, after all, as a proportion of the population there's now been more people that have died in Syria in a civil war that shows absolutely no sign of ending than in the entirety of Iraq since 2003. So, you know, inaction is also a policy and a decision with consequence."

Blair has, in fact, been calling for Western military intervention in Syria for quite some time. On Feb. 28, as the 10th anniversary of the Iraq war was approaching, he told the BBC that, not only had he been right to destroy Iraq, but the world must agree with him to do

the same to Syria and Iran, immediately. And on June 20, during a conference in Jerusalem, he declared that “time is not our friend,” adding that, “the cost of staying out” of wars against Syria and Iran will be higher than going to war.

This is the same kind of lying propaganda that he used to start the 2003 Iraq War.

Queen’s Prerogative Under Attack

Blair was very much on the minds of those Members of Parliament who took part in the July 11 debate, but two of them went explicitly after the Queen’s prerogative to take the country to war without Parliament participating in the decision.

The issue of the royal prerogative was first raised by Labour MP Paul Flynn, who noted that, “The assumption is being made that Governments decide whether we go to war, but even that is not true.” That decision, he said, “rests with the monarch under the royal prerogative.” Therefore, “The reason we need Parliament to be supreme, and not the Government acting under royal prerogative, is the bitter experience we have had. In 2003, this House was bribed, bullied, and bamboozled into voting for the war in Iraq.” Nearly 50 Labour Members of Parliament who had already made statements against the Iraq War “were pressurised into changing their minds and abstaining or voting for the war,” and it was all on the basis of a lie, “or misunderstanding,” that Saddam Hussein allegedly had weapons of mass destruction, Flynn said. The same process was repeated for the deployment of British troops into Helmand province in Afghanistan in 2006; and the pressure is being applied again “for war in Iran to protect ourselves from non-existent long-range Iranian missiles carrying non-existent Iranian nuclear bombs.”

Those decisions, Flynn concluded, should be made in Parliament, “and there certainly should not be any Government [i.e., royal—ed.] pressure that settles those decisions. We should do it in future in free debate.”

Flynn’s point about the royal prerogative was en-



NATO

The Queen’s favorite Tony Blair is working overtime to escalate the conflict in Syria, using the same kind of lies he did in pushing the Iraq War.

dorsed by Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn. “This really goes to the heart of the power of Parliament because anyone outside this place, and indeed anyone outside this country, would find it extraordinary that in the 21st century we still do not have a war powers act, and that the Prime Minister can still use the powers of the royal prerogative to take us to war, supply arms, sign treaties, or anything else,” Corbyn said. “Surely a democratic Parliament and democratic accountability of the Executive require a vote in the House of Commons before any major decision can be taken that would have enormous implications for our foreign policy.”

Cross-Party Opposition to Cameron

The motion itself was the product of opposition across all three parties to Cameron’s policy of arming the Syrian rebels, and the debate reflected that fact. Tory MP John Baron, the sponsor of the motion, warned against the dangers of pumping more arms into a situation where there is already a huge amount of weapons.

“If humanitarian concerns are uppermost in people’s minds,” he said, “it beggars belief that anyone could suggest that pouring more arms into the conflict would not add to the violence and suffering.” He also warned that “the civil war in Syria is, in many respects, a proxy war being fought out at different levels,” those levels being Sunni versus Shi’a, Iran versus Saudi Arabia, and even the West versus Russia and China. “The risk of pouring more weapons into this conflict and of pouring more fuel onto that fire is that we not only increase the violence within Syria, but extend the conflict beyond Syria’s borders in very large measure.”

Peter Hain, a former Labour minister, argued that Britain is, in fact, culpable to a large degree for the violence in Syria. “We should have promoted a negotiated solution from the very beginning,” he said. “Instead, we began by demanding [Syrian President] Assad’s unconditional surrender and departure. However, calling for regime change meant chasing an unattainable goal at

the cost of yet more bloodshed and destruction, and so did supporting a rebel military victory.”

Menzies Campbell, a former leader of the Liberal Democrats, told the House that supplying arms to the Syrian opposition “constitutes a major change in the foreign policy of this government, with unknown political, military, and perhaps even Constitutional significance. Therefore, “the House is entitled to pass judgement on this policy before it is implemented.” Campbell went even further, however, to say, “Were the government to implement a policy of this kind without allowing the House an opportunity to pass judgement, it would be an abuse of the process, and would most certainly be regarded as such outside this House.”

On July 10, Foreign Secretary William Hague appeared before the House of Commons to make a statement on the Cameron government’s foreign policy, and in the process of answering questions, assured the House that the government would bring the question up for a vote should it decide to send arms to the Syrian rebels. While a number of partisans of the government used this point to try to argue that the motion under debate was “academic” or unnecessary, Baron noted that “there is a deficit of trust on these issues.”

In fact, more than 80 Tory MPs have signed a letter to Cameron asking that prior to any decisions being made about Syria policy, that they be put before the Parliament for a full debate and a vote. The trust problem was no doubt aggravated by Cameron’s statement a few days earlier that the U.K. had to retain the “ability to take action very swiftly.”

The Lords Weigh In

Discontent with the idea of arming the Syrian rebels has also been expressed in the House of Lords, notably by Lord Paddy Ashdown, leader of the Liberal Democrats from 1989 to 1999, and UN High Commissioner for Bosnia from 2002 to 2006. Ashdown has a history of supporting military interventions in other countries, but he nonetheless argued, in a speech before the Lords on July 1, that military intervention in Syria is “not sensible,” despite the fact that he otherwise agrees that Assad must step down.

Ashdown gave a number of reasons why Britain should not supply arms to the Syrian rebels, but the most important reason had to do with the potential for a wider war. “Syria is not the conflict,” he said. “[I]t is the front line in a wider conflict that is no longer about the great Satan of the West, but is now about the great heretic in Tehran. What we are seeing being built up now is a determined attempt, funded by the Saudis and the Qataris, to create a powerful, radicalised, jihadist Sunni element that can capture the community of the Sunni as a preparation for a wider war against the Shi’a.”

What is happening in Syria, Ashdown continued, is connected to what is happening in Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, and Mali. Therefore, “it is important that we understand the position of Russia. We believe that Russia is in favour of Assad because he is Russia’s last man in the Middle East. However, there is a deeper reason that we should understand. The Russian Islamic republics of Dagestan, Chechnya, and so on, are being infected by exactly the same movement. They know that the jihadisation of the Sunni umma [community] is affecting their stability.” Therefore, Russia is in great danger, he explained.

“So we have this terrifying situation of the West being instrumentalised on one side in favour of the Sunnis, and the Russians being instrumentalised on the other side in favour of the Shi’a in what runs a grave risk, although not a certainty, of widening into a much broader religious conflict that will engulf the Middle East.”

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