

Britain's Labour Party Hilary Benn's Support of Cameron's Decision to Bomb Syria: High on Emotion and Elocution but Flawed

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Praise for the speech delivered by Hilary Benn, the shadow foreign secretary of the opposition Labour Party at the recent Parliamentary debate on whether to commence air strikes targeted at Islamic State insurgents in Syria, was quick to come through the media.

The *Spectator* magazine referred to it as an “extraordinary speech,” while *Sky News* intoned that it had been a “truly historic speech”. For the *Daily Telegraph*, the speech was the speech of a “true leader”. Many sources were prone to describing it as having been “electrifying” while others spoke of it as “politically elevating” him and being the “speech of a generation.”

And truth be told, it appeared to be an impressive oratorical combination of emotion and elocution backed by reasoned out arguments.

His speech was replete with intellectual justifications predicated on the inherent internationalism of the ideology of socialism and of taking the fight to the avowed enemy of fascism.

He presented legal justifications first through United Nations Resolution 2249, paragraph 5 which calls upon member states to take all necessary measures to redouble and co-ordinate their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by ISIL and to eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Iraq and Syria, and secondly, on the grounds of national self-defence via Article 51 of the UN Charter which enable nation states to engage in self-defence, including collective self-defence, against armed attack.



Hilary Benn Syria speech

There were also emotive references to the brutal executions that have become the trademark of Islamic State, as well as to the sexual bondage into which the group has placed many Yazidi females.

The group had declared war on the Western world and was guided by an immutably draconian ideology with values antithetical to those which the British parliament and the citizens it serves have long cherished and have defended by resort to force of arms against the likes of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini.

Benn retreated from the despatch box with cheers echoing around the chamber.

It was a triumphal moment. But whether he made a substantive case for British intervention is extremely doubtful. There were missing facts and there was a profound disconnect from the overriding context of the promulgation of the Syrian conflict and the means by which it has been sustained. There was no outlining of a clear strategy towards achieving both victory and a lasting peace.

Furthermore, the situation regarding the internal affairs of Benn's party and the use of the debate as an opportunity for those to the right of the party to assert themselves and destabilise the leadership of the recently elected leader Jeremy Corbyn cannot be left out.

The calling for the debate was of course controversial in itself given the fact that Prime Minister David Cameron had two years earlier failed to secure enough votes to get the go ahead to bomb Syria.

That particular vote had been prompted by a chemical attack on Ghouta which the Western powers and its allies in the Middle East had sought to blame on the forces of President Bashar al Assad. Cameron's recalibrated cross hairs prompted the charge of rank opportunism; of picking a changing enemy as it suited him.

The object of a proposed bombing campaign in 2013, in fulfillment of US President Barack Obama's earlier declared "red line" would have been to "degrade" the capability of Assad's military infrastructure.

Had Parliament consented and the US congress given the go ahead to its president, the result would have led to a sustained campaign by NATO conducted along the lines as it had done in Libya with the objective being to overthrow the legitimate government of a country which has taken a foreign policy stance that is independent of that of Washington's.

And as was the case in Libya, Syria would have fallen into the hands of Islamist groups, the most prominent of which at the time was the al Qaeda-affiliated al Nusra Front. In other words, without any discernibly united, preferably secular and democratic opposition party or coalition of such parties, Syria would most likely be in the chaotic condition that Libya is in today: a lawless cesspit of warring militias, some of who now bear allegiance to Islamic State.

Benn's rationale about focussing on the threat provided by the Islamic State as a group of "fascists" is flawed. He is seriously ill-informed if he is not aware that the 70,000 or so rebels mislabeled as 'moderate', including the aforementioned al Nusra Front, are guided by

the same form of ideology. He surely must have heard of the admission by a senior US general about the “four or five” US-trained moderate rebels who represent the sum total of a 500 million dollar programme.

The credibility of Benn’s case is flawed in one fundamental aspect: its failure to take into account the role of Turkey in this conflict. His calculations cannot be taken seriously if on the one hand he (correctly) mentions the porous border between Syria and Iraq, but at the same time fails to ponder the state of affairs in existence on the border between Turkey and Syria.

The Islamic State cannot be defeated if Turkey, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, is allowed to continue allowing Islamic State insurgents to traverse its border at will. The border is used to transport illicitly acquired Syrian and Iraqi oil to Turkey where it is then traded at knock down prices for arms and ammunition.

It will not be defeated if political figures within NATO member states such as Benn fail to acknowledge and probe the admissions of US army generals such as Wesley Clarke, the former supreme allied commander of the alliance and Michael Flynn, the recently retired director of the US Defense Intelligence Agency, that the Islamic State was created by US intelligence in combination with other intelligence agencies to enable Sunni extremists to overthrow Arab secular regimes as well as to fight Hezbollah and destabilize Iran.

For Clarke speaking to CNN in February 2015, Islamic State was started by the funding provided from “friends and allies” of the United States who needed Sunni jihadist recruits as the only highly motivated force that would be capable of taking on Hezbollah. Marginalising Hezbollah and by extension, Iran, could only be achieved by the destruction of the Baathist government headed by Assad. Flynn, for his part stated that US policy makers made a “willful decision” to enable the rise of Islamic State.

Benn spoke about “extending” the US-led bombing campaign in Iraq to Syria in order to counter the Islamic State, but failed to assess its level of impact on the strength and capacities of the Islamic State. It has not nearly had the effect on the re-conquest of Islamic State taken territory as has the co-ordinated efforts of Russian air strikes and ground action by the Syrian Arab army.

The coalition of US and Arab air forces operating in Iraq cannot hope to significantly debilitate Islamic State in that theatre of operations when the number of sorties taken are far lower than NATO’s intensive bombardment of Serbia back in the 1990s. A commentary in the *Wall Street Journal* in October 2014 noted that that while NATO strike sorties averaged 138 per day, the figure amounted to seven against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. It was the columnists concluded an “unserious air war.”

The Russian action, backed up by statistical evidence referring to total sorties undertaken as well as of re-taken Syrian territory, has clearly exposed the US effort as not seriously aiming for the defeat of Islamic State. At most, it had an objective of containment; this in keeping with a Freedom of Information Act-released Pentagon document circulated in 2012 which specified the desirability of the creation of a Sunni Islamic state in Eastern Syria.

Benn was also flawed in his confident assertions relating to the legality of British military force on Syrian territory that is held by Islamic State insurgents. The considered opinion of international law experts, Dapo Akande and Marko Milanovic is that the unprecedented

provision of paragraph 5 of Resolution 2249 falls short of being a stand-alone authorization for using force against Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq.

The reason for this is that both assess that most Security Council resolutions which authorise the use of force have certain recurring features. First, they have a preambular paragraph which specifically invokes Chapter VII, that is, the powers the Council has to maintain peace. Secondly, they use the words “decides” as the active verb in the paragraph that authorises force, and thirdly, they use the term “all necessary means” or “all necessary measures” as the jargon for authorising force.

Paragraph 5 does not contain the first two features but has third – “all necessary measures.” The conclusion by Akande and Milanovic is that that the paragraph does not intend to serve as the stand-alone authorisation for the use of force against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

The vote was of course arranged under the cloud of a speech given behind closed doors to the Conservative Party’s 1922 Committee by David Cameron who asserted that Jeremy Corbyn and anyone supporting a stance of non-intervention were “terrorist sympathisers”.

It was an unfortunate comment which perhaps was in keeping with Cameron’s propensity to resort to name-calling and bullying when he is confronted by compelling counter-arguments and is threatened with not getting his own way.

It is Cameron who after all suggested that those whom he termed as “non-violent extremists” including persons who question and contradict official government narratives on events such as 9/11 should be designated as threats to society every bit as dangerous as threat posed by members of Islamic State.

While Benn did begin his speech by stating that the leader of his party “is not a terrorist sympathiser” and called on Cameron to apologise, his critique of the British prime minister fell far short of what could reasonably be mustered when Cameron is in fact on record as having given aid to terrorist militias in order to achieve certain objectives.

Cameron, by virtue of his active support for NATO intervention in Libya, not only succeeded in reducing the nation with the African continent’s highest standard of living to the wretched state of lawlessness and deprivation that it is today; causing in the process a third of its population to seek refuge in neighbouring Tunisia, he has also created the conditions for Libya to become a terrorist enclave and a repository for battle experienced jihadists who were transferred to Syria via Turkey for a further endeavour aimed at overthrowing a another secular Arab government.

It was Cameron who in 2011 ordered the Special Air Service (SAS), a British Special Forces unit, to support the al Qaeda-affiliated Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) towards the end of achieving the overthrow of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

Cameron’s choice of words are also ironic given that fact that an Old Bailey case involving an accusation of “participating in terrorist activities in Syria” in the middle of 2015 against one Bherlin Gildon, collapsed because a trial would have revealed embarrassing information about British security and intelligence service support for so-called rebel groups including the supply of weapons and ammunition.

Given that rebel groups other than Islamic State have murdered civilians in Syria and that Islamist militias have done the same in Libya, the case for ascribing Cameron with a

counter-label and even a legally accurate designation as an accessory to the commission of acts of terrorism would not be an inaccurate one.

The plot to overthrow Assad under the pretext of the Arab Spring predated Cameron's coming to power and was apparently heavy with British involvement. The revelation by the former French foreign minister, Roland Dumas, that he invited to join such a plot by British officials is something Benn and others within the British political establishment have failed to acknowledge.

Benn's insistence on legal propriety, as evidenced by his reference to Resolution 2249 and Article 51 of the Charter, while no doubt predicated on the memory that he voted in support of the illegal war that toppled Saddam Hussein, is nonetheless compromised by his silence and therefore acquiescence to his country's complicity in an illegal enterprise to overthrow the legitimate government of a sovereign state.

The "major airlift" of arms from Zagreb in Croatia to Syrian rebels as reported by the *Daily Telegraph* in March of 2013 was a transaction paid for by Saudi Arabia at the behest of the United States. The shipment also included arms which were either "British-supplied or British procured." It was carried out in contravention of an embargo on arms sales by the European Union. It is against the norms of international law to supply weapons to terror groups in an endeavour to overthrow the legitimate government of another nation state.

Even at this stage of the conflict, it was clearly the case that such weapons were getting into the hands of Islamist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and not to purportedly nationalist and secular-minded groups promoted as the so-called 'Free Syrian Army'.

It is also clear that at this time, British military officers were among a contingent of NATO military personnel stationed in countries bordering Syria and offering training to rebel leaders and former Syrian Army officers.

Benn's reference to the Vienna peace talks as being the best hope of achieving a ceasefire "that would bring an end to Assad's bombing" and lead to transitional government and elections gives a clue as to his tacit understanding of the deceit behind longstanding British policy towards the government of Assad.

What interest, after all, does Britain have in securing the overthrow of an admittedly dictatorial government? Hillary Benn can hardly be ignorant of the fact that the secular make up of Syria guaranteed the protection and integration of the country's long-standing Christian population and other minorities. An earlier removal of its Baathist government would have precipitated its fall into the hands of Islamists and the removal of the Assad government now would lead to the same result.

Christian Roland Dumas offered the following explanation:

It is important to know that this Syrian regime has a very anti-Israeli stance. Consequently, everything that moves in the region- and I have this from the former Israeli prime minister who told me that "we'll try to get on with our neighbours but those who don't agree with us will be destroyed."

At the heart of Western policy toward the Middle East one which is geared towards ensuring the survival and protection of the state of Israel. This is a central plank notwithstanding the overlap of issues such as the interests of the Saudis and the Sunni Gulf States in

establishing Sunni supremacy in Syria and Turkish 'neo-Ottoman' initiatives that seek to achieve the same sectarian objective.

And while the Syrian conflict may also have been stoked by the preference of the Assad government for an Iranian natural gas pipeline route to Europe to an alternative one proposed by Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council, the overarching policy aimed at breaking up the Syrian nation state is one which has been stage-managed by the United States.

It has for long been Israeli geo-strategic policy to balkanise the Arab nations particularly those such as Iraq and Syria which were led by strong military governments with nationalist ideologies in order to maintain its regional hegemony. It is also the policy of the United States to achieve a reorganising of national borders as part of a strategy for securing the energy resources of the region.

It is clear that NATO powers such as France and Britain, sensing the possible pacification of Syria by a concerted effort by the Russian Federation along with the Syrian government have taken the opportunity to involve themselves more directly in Syria in an attempt to place themselves into a position where they may be able to effect the goal of removing Assad and effecting the desired geo-political objective of Israel and the United States: the division of Syria.

But a concomitant of this policy has been the fomenting of sectarian divisions during an envisaged 'long war' during which the United States strategy has been to aid Sunni Islamist groups against the forces of the Shia world. This state of affairs was clearly set out in a United States Army-funded report by the RAND Corporation in 2008 entitled *Unfolding the Future of the Long War: Motivations, Prospects and Implications for the U.S. Army*.

Britain has played an integral part in the germination of the state of affairs. The point is that prior to British involvement in NATO's overthrow first of Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq and then of Gaddafi in Libya followed by Britain's connivance in fomenting a largely imported Sunni Islamist insurrection against the government of Bashar al Assad in Syria, there was no al Qaeda or al Nusra or Islamic State causing mayhem in those countries or attempting export terror to the streets of Britain.

Benn's argument for supporting airstrikes is fundamentally flawed for the reason that it is embarking on a battle which the defence minister, Michael Fallon admits will be a long and protracted one without any coherent plan. It risks plunging Britain into a quagmire of the sort that involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq did.

It also risks serving as a rallying point for further recruitment to Islamist militias. Even Tony Blair has forced to admit that the germination of the Islamic State is a direct consequence of the invasion of Iraq.

By asking whether "we can really leave to others the responsibility for defending our national security when it is our responsibility", Benn clearly indicated that he subscribes to David Cameron's position that Britain cannot "sub-contract" its security to other nations. The retort to this by Peter Ford, a former British ambassador to Syria is Britain should not make itself the "hostage to others."

Putting British planes into action in the overcrowded Syrian skies leaves the possibility of

unfortunate incidents in future operations in terms not only of the unintended deaths of civilian populations on the ground, but also of a clash with the Russian military who claim that they have the overriding legal justification for intervention given that the Syrian government requested Russian support.

Benn emoted over socialist and other political Left support for the lost cause of the Spanish Republican coalition against General Franco's military rebellion comprised of a coalition of nationalists. He fails to grasp that action against Islamic State will prove futile given the present circumstances dictated by the United States.

Simply put, the Islamic State insurgents are but the latest in a line of Islamist assets used in the service of promoting a range of geo-political agendas of its ally, the United States. These have included foreign adventures in Soviet-era Afghanistan, Kosovo and Libya.

While Benn has impressed many with his recourse to emotion, it would be useful to remember a wise saying that while emotion may serve as an excellent petrol it is, after all things are considered, a rather poor engine.

It will only get you so far.

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