

IN FOCUS

**PACIFISM OR PRAGMATISM?
THE 2013 PARLIAMENTARY
VOTE ON MILITARY ACTION IN
SYRIA**



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Introduction

Following the experiences of large-scale military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, there has been a shift in military engagement towards remote warfare. This is a “light footprint” approach to military intervention, where local and regional forces do the bulk of the frontline fighting and the UK plays a supporting role – for example providing training, arms, intelligence or air support to allies fighting groups like Islamic State (IS), Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, al Qaida or the Taliban.¹ Many commentators, both inside and outside government, have argued that this change in approach is partly a government reaction to a perceived war-weariness of both the public and Parliament, who they fear have become sceptical of any decision to use military force abroad.²

Because remote warfare can offer the government military options that don’t require recourse to Parliament under the War Powers Convention,³ it makes it an attractive option for risk-averse governments who fear losing a vote. The Cameron government’s failure to gain parliamentary authorisation for the principle of military action in Syria on 29th August 2013 has compounded this fear. Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa, stated that “the Syria conflict has illustrated that ... there is public hesitation about the use of armed force...We don’t know as a Parliament what we would take action on now.”⁴ Alison McGovern MP and Tom Tugendhat MP also wrote in a Policy Exchange piece that “it is vital that we learn the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan. ... But the correct response is not to refuse ever to act again.”⁵ Similarly, Johnny Mercer MP said: “We must wake up from our hangover

from Iraq before it is terminal for this nation’s global standing.”⁶

However, our research reveals it is far from clear that the 2013 Syria vote was a marker of parliamentary pacifism, or that it merits its status as a symbol of the perils of democratising the decision to use force. In this briefing we use the transcript of the debate and interviews conducted between January and March this year to assess alternative hypotheses:

- Was the vote an indictment of the government’s lack of a clear long-term strategy for intervening in the Syrian conflict?
- Were fears over the lack of UN approval and the risk of escalation in Syria a deciding factor?
- Was confusion over the process of calling a vote – which brought parliamentarians back from recess but was watered down from voting to approve strikes to a vote on the ‘principle of military action’ – terminal for the government’s chances of approval?

This research suggests that, far from being a statement of parliamentary pacifism, the vote was a result of parliamentary pragmatism in the face of an unconvincing strategy for how British military strikes would build stability in Syria.

How long is the “shadow of Iraq”?

The Iraq War loomed large during the debate. It was mentioned 100 times throughout the discussion in the House of Commons. For example, then Leader of the Opposition Rt Hon Ed Miliband MP stated: “I am very clear about the fact that we have got to learn the lessons of Iraq.”⁷ Similarly, Angus Robertson, then Westminster Spokesperson for the Scottish National Party (SNP) said: “We cannot ignore the lessons of the calamitous Iraq war.”⁸

Discussions around intelligence also had an eye to its misuse in Iraq. Dr James Strong of Queen Mary University notes that: “Distrust bred during debates over Iraq led many to speak out against the case for a further military engagement based primarily on evidence from secret intelligence.”⁹ During the debate, “evidence” was mentioned 114 times and “intelligence” was mentioned 83. Moreover, a number of MPs were concerned that they could be misled again; for example, Conservative (Con) MP James Arbuthnot, the chairman of the defence committee, stated: “I personally believed Tony Blair when he said that he believed that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.”¹⁰ In interviews, Sir David Amess MP (Con) spoke of the damage Tony Blair had done to parliamentary trust by lying at the despatch box.

Several MPs also spoke of the British public’s memories of Iraq. Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) MP Dr Alasdair McDonnell stated: “The public have long and bitter memories of Iraq and Afghanistan.”¹¹ Richard Harrington MP (Con) said: “It is certainly true that the British public have little appetite for further military engagement in the middle east.”¹² In interviews since, one senior Labour MP stated that: “There is certainly a lower public appetite for engagement because of military personnel who lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan and questions around what we achieved.”

It is worth noting that while public opinion was mentioned a lot during the debate many MPs remained unsure of what the public actually thought. This is fairly consistent with expert commentary, which indicated that while the British public remained sceptical of intervention, their opinions had become more sympathetic to the idea of British intervention by the time of the 2013 vote.¹³ Similarly, Strong notes, “The five votes between 2003 and 2015 [over the use of military force] suggest that MPs are especially willing to follow their own personal beliefs and rebel over military action.”¹⁴

Those we interviewed also disagreed on the pressure that automated emails from constituents might be generating for parliamentarians to vote against the government. These are emails generated by campaign groups such as 38 Degrees, which allow constituents to easily email their MP about key issues. They amount to

hundreds of emails in MPs inboxes on a normal week, and when a particularly high-profile issue is being campaigned on can be into the thousands per week. This no doubt has an impact on MPs; however, some noted that it is hard to tell how much a constituent is concerned about an issue through these automated emails. In fact, one interviewee spoke of instances where constituents had not edited the email properly and a section saying “insert cause here” was still there. Similarly, Dame Margaret Beckett MP argued that while MPs took into account the views of their constituents, automated emails were only one factor in such an important decision.

Indeed, while Cameron concluded the vote by declaring that “it is very clear tonight that... the British parliament, reflecting the views of the British people, does not want to see British military action,”¹⁵ there were many other factors than war-weariness at play.

While Iraq loomed large, the concerns raised during the debate over proposed intervention in 2013 seem to indicate that while Parliament was keen to learn from the UK’s past mistakes, it was not outright against the principle of military intervention as a result of them.

Lack of a strategy

One of the key concerns at the time was that few believed Cameron had control of the situation. This sentiment was captured in concerns raised by Labour (Lab) MP Bob Ainsworth who stated: “The Prime Minister cites the issues relating to Iraq and the impact they have on decisions today, but the perception—a justifiable perception in my opinion—of his own preparedness to get involved in this conflict long before the current incident surely has an impact on the decisions of today.”¹⁶

During the debate, “strategy” or “objective” were mentioned 70 times. For example, John Baron MP (Con) said: “We must also ask questions about the military objectives—there are many questions on, for example, the scope of the operation and the potential for mission creep. What happens if Assad uses chemical weapons again or if the rebels use them?”¹⁷ The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MP Jeffrey Donaldson asked: “If we intervene, where does it begin and end?”¹⁸ Rt Hon George Howarth MP (Lab), stated: “the Prime Minister was not able to give enough information...to convince me that his proposed course of action would achieve [his stated] end.”¹⁹ Caroline Lucas MP (Green Party) stated: “I have yet to hear what the strategy would be for Syria and the wider region in the event of an attack.”²⁰

A number of MPs also drew attention to the complexities on the ground in Syria and expressed concern that the UK could end up exacerbating instability. Bob Blackman MP (Con) said he would oppose military action because it could escalate

tension with Russia and Syria “and probably end the chances of peace in the middle east.”²¹ Robert Ffello MP (Lab) said “Action that is taken that makes things worse creates a worse situation.”²² Jim Sheridan MP (Lab) asked: “Does my right hon. Friend agree that any reckless or irresponsible action could lead to full war in that area?”²³ Liberal Democrat (LD) Sir Menzies Campbell MP also said: “My concern is that if we open the gate once, it will be difficult to close it.”²⁴

These views reflected those raised two months prior in an open letter by 81 Conservative MPs who called on Cameron to take the decision over arming Syrians rebels to a parliamentary vote because there are “many, many sides and no end.”²⁵ As well of those of Lord Dannatt, the former head of the army, reportedly said that he did not support the intervention.²⁶ Lord Hurd, the former Foreign Secretary, also said “I can’t see how [airstrikes] is going to lessen the suffering of Syrian people. I think it’s likely to increase and expand the civil war in Syria.”²⁷ As such, many advised the government to seek greater international support before taking military action. Arbutnot said: “If the world wants us to act as the international policeman, then let the world say so because in the past when we have done so, the world has not tended to thank us.”²⁸ Miliband said: “The level of international support is vital, should we decide to take military action.”²⁹ Lorely Burt MP (LD) also argued: “I am not suggesting that we take no action; I simply think that we must have international approval before taking that step.”³⁰

The UN was mentioned 181 times during the debate. For example, James Brazier MP asked the Prime Minister to “confirm to the House that were we to find during that process overwhelming opposition in the General Assembly and a majority against in the Security Council, as occurred 10 years ago, we would not then just motor on?”³¹ Similarly, Dame Joan Ruddock MP (Lab) said: “Has the Prime Minister made it clear to President Obama that in no way does this country support any attack that could come before the UN inspectors have done their job?”³² Simon Hughes MP (LD) also asked the Prime Minister: “Will he assure us that he will continue to engage—however difficult it is—with Russia and the other key countries to try to make sure that the UN route is productive and that the diplomatic process is engaged again as soon as possible?”³³

Mishandling the process

Many suggested that the outcome of the vote was a result of Cameron’s mishandling of the process. Sir Hew Strachan of the University of St. Andrews blamed the result on a “seat of the pants” approach to the vote, “with insufficient preparing of the press or Parliament.”³⁴ One expert who was in Parliament at the time said that Cameron failed to have the “tearoom chats”. In other words, he failed to have one-on-one

conversations with concerned MPs outside of the Chamber to convince them that he had the situation under control. Similarly, Dame Margaret Beckett MP cited Cameron’s arrogance for the failure of his government to galvanise cross-party support. In fact, at the time David Hughes, Chief Political Correspondent for the Press Association, reported hearing the “banging of tables from within private meeting where David Cameron is addressing Tory MPs.”³⁵ Dr. Jamie Gaskarth of the University of Birmingham also quotes another “Labour source” as saying: “his stubbornness, his anger and his rush towards war ... was the central cause of his defeat.”³⁶

Relatedly, Cameron appeared to misread some key factors in the lead up to the debate, which may have proved fatal. First, the fact that MPs had been brought back early from recess led many to believe strikes would be imminent if they approved action. However, this was complicated by the fact that Cameron seemed to have initially intended to recall Parliament to vote on airstrikes. Then, concerned he didn’t have the votes to win a parliamentary vote, he instead asked MPs to vote on the “principle” of military action. This meant MPs—expecting to vote on proposed military action, and not just the principle of launching a combat air campaign against Assad—returned to Westminster at the end of August confused about what mandate they would be handing the government.

MPs, both during the debate and those that we interviewed after, believed that if they had approved the government motion, there would have been UK airstrikes by the weekend. John McDonnell MP (Lab) said: “It is widely acknowledged that the American President has set a timetable, most probably for an attack this weekend.”³⁷ Paul Flynn MP (Lab) also asked: “Is not the real reason we are here today not the horror at these weapons ... but as a result of the American President having foolishly drawn a red line, so that he is now in the position of either having to attack or face humiliation?”³⁸

Second, Cameron failed to account for the internal party dynamics. As Strong notes: “There is... no government less able to win a vote on military action ... than a weak Conservative one.”³⁹ The Coalition government had shifted the sense of alliance. A number of commentators had already noticed prior to the vote that MPs felt less committed to the Coalition and so were more willing to challenge government. Experts had already commented on the way MPs were more willing to vote against the Coalition because they didn’t feel like they were part of it.⁴⁰ Other issues, such as the Alternative Voting referendum and the House of Lords reform, had also put a strain on the Coalition’s strength in pulling MPs together.⁴¹ This was perhaps typified by Jenny Willott MP (LD), saying to media on the day of the vote that she was “undecided” about the Syria issue even though she was a government whip.⁴²

This made the support of the Opposition especially important, but Cameron had failed to gain Miliband's backing.⁴³ Some of the experts we spoke to thought that Miliband was using Cameron's weakness to score political points. For example, Cameron thought he had Miliband's support until 5.15pm of the evening before the vote.⁴⁴ However, others said that Miliband – and his party – were simply not convinced by the government motion. One commentator said in the *Spectator*: "I don't think it speaks badly of Miliband that, after sampling opinion in his party, he believed he was unable to say that Labour was for intervention."⁴⁵ One Labour MP we spoke to said that the party considered the Opposition motion as providing far more safeguards against the UK slipping into conflict. However, as Gaskarth notes, Cameron chose not to accept the Opposition motion, which may have saved the vote.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Patrick Porter from the University of Exeter, states: "Parliament voted not to bomb the Assad regime in 2013, ... not because elected MPs have amorally abandoned the world... [but] ... because they thought joining the Syrian civil war was a bad idea."⁴⁷ Similarly, the late Jo Cox MP, argued that: "Everyone I have spoken to accepts that airstrikes alone will not work, yet the focus on the other elements of the strategy are too weak to be effective, too underdeveloped to be compelling."⁴⁸

Thus, far from presenting a Parliament afraid of military action, the 2013 vote shows Parliament working as it should: refusing to approve a course of action that they feared might make matters worse. The Iraq War does not appear to have made Parliament pacifist, but it has made MPs more mindful of the lessons of the past and more willing to question decisions over the use of force. Our research suggests that the August 2013 vote was mishandled, and that its ultimate conclusion was the result of a failure of the Cameron government to convince MPs that it had a sound strategy or a compelling vision for how taking military action would improve stability in Syria and the wider region.

Using the 2013 vote as a strawman for the perils of including Parliament in decisions over the use of force could do long-term damage to hard-won gains in transparency and accountability. The War Powers Convention is fragile and can be broken quickly.⁴⁹ Prime Minister Theresa May's recent decision to launch airstrikes against the Assad regime without parliamentary approval shows how suddenly this system can be destabilised.

This research suggests that Parliament is not pacifist, but pragmatist. Excluding them from open debate over

decisions to use force removes an important check against poor strategy and unconvincing policy. Both Parliament and the government should fight harder to ensure that the spirit of the Convention is upheld and that accountability gaps over remote warfare are closed. Only then will the incentive for risk-averse governments to wage opaque and unaccountable wars be weakened.

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This report has been written by staff at the Oxford Research Group's Remote Warfare Programme, formerly known as the Remote Control Project. We were set up in 2014 to examine changes in military engagement, with a focus on remote warfare. This is the trend in which countries like the United Kingdom choose to support local and regional forces on the front lines rather than deploying large numbers of their own troops.

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