

# Welcoming the vote of the British Parliament while supporting the Syrian uprising

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**The best way to “punish” the Syrian regime is to enable the popular uprising to break it, not to bomb the country.**

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In a rare instance of the executive in a Western imperial state taking “parliamentary democracy” in earnest, the UK government consulted Parliament about military action against the Syrian regime without being certain in advance that it would win the vote, and decided to respect the outcome that repudiated its plan. As a staunch opponent of the Syrian Baathist regime from a radical democratic perspective, I have several reasons to welcome this outcome.

The first reason is that any limitation on the powers of the imperial executive that has become the usual pattern in most major Western states is undoubtedly positive from a democratic point of view and should be greeted unreservedly. Even though, on the face of it, the decision in this instance spared one of the most ruthless and murderous dictatorships, the fact that the British government asked Parliament for authorisation to engage in a military action purported to be “limited” sets a standard that it will be more difficult from now on for the British government and its peers in electoral democracies to ignore. Although a repetition of the British scenario in Washington is most unlikely, the pressure on the US administration itself is mounting as a result of the British vote. This is in spite of the post-Vietnam War Powers Resolution that “limited” the US executive’s power to wage war to 60 days without an authorisation from Congress, a resolution that the White House has nevertheless repeatedly violated.

Not that I have the slightest illusion about the reasons for which many hawkish MPs voted against military action this time. They did so not out of “pacifism” for sure, let alone “anti-imperialism”, but for the same reason that made Western opinion makers in their vast majority display a patent lack of sympathy for the cause of the Syrian popular uprising. This reason is above all the lack of confidence in the Syrian uprising, as US Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey openly confessed most recently. A consideration that is all the more compelling in that the most recent experience in Libya was a total fiasco in that regard: NATO’s intervention only helped turn Libya less West-friendly than it had been under Gaddafi during the last years of his reign. And, of course, Libya offered the major enticement of being a major oil exporter, which Syria is not.

The second reason to welcome the vote by the British Parliament is that it was clearly related to the requirement of a UN legitimation – which prompted the UK government to submit a draft resolution to the UN Security Council in its attempt to convince a majority of MPs. Despite the obvious limitations of the UN and of existing international law, it is better that international relations be institutionalised under some form of the rule of law, however deficient that law is, than be dominated by the “law of the jungle” whereby powerful states, the US above all, feel free to decide

unilaterally against whom and when to use force. The idea that the rule of law is a straightjacket by which Russia and China can prevent truly humanitarian actions from taking place is predicated on the view that Western military interventions are generally motivated by noble intentions. They are definitely not. Suffice it to note that the two Western military interventions since the end of the Cold War that most blatantly violated international law – Kosovo 1999 and Iraq 2003 – both used humanitarian pretexts as covers for imperial designs and led to catastrophic humanitarian results.

The third reason to welcome the parliamentary vote is the one most directly predicated on my resolute support to the Syrian popular uprising. The military action that is being contemplated by Washington is about dealing the murderous Syrian regime a few military blows in order to “punish” it for the use of chemical weapons against civilians. I have hardly any doubt that the Syrian regime did resort to such weapons in its barbaric onslaught on the Syrian people. True, it will be hard for the UN inspection team, which was allowed to reach the scene of the crime only several days after it was perpetrated, to find any smoking gun. But the fact that the Syrian regime possesses chemical weapons and the means to strike with them (to mount a large scale rocket and artillery attack, as did happen) is beyond doubt, as is its cold-blooded-serial-killer aptitude to use them on civilians. Witness this recorded use of an incendiary bomb dropped by a fighter jet on a civilian target (a school playground): in this case at least, no one can reasonably dispute the fact that the regime has the monopoly of air power in the Syrian civil war. But this begs the question: is killing up to fifteen hundred people with chemical weapons more serious a crime than killing over a hundred thousand with “conventional” weapons? Why then does Washington want to strike now suddenly after placidly watching the Syrian people being slaughtered, its country devastated, and survivors in the millions turned into refugees and displaced persons?

The truth is that the forthcoming strikes are only intended as a means to restore the “credibility” of the US and its allies in the face of an alliance of the Syrian, Iranian, and Russian governments that has taken full liberty in escalating the war on the Syrian people despite all US calls for compromise. The strikes are necessary in order to reinstate a US imperial standing that has been much humiliated over the last few years in Iraq, in Afghanistan, by Iran, and even by Israel’s Netanyahu. These strikes will not help the Syrian people: they will increase the destruction and death toll without enabling the Syrians to get rid of their tyrant. They are not intended for this latter goal. In fact, Washington does not want the Syrian people to topple the dictatorship: it wants to force on the Syrian opposition a deal with the bulk of the regime, minus Assad. This is the so-called Yemen solution that President Barack Obama has been actively pursuing since last year, and that Secretary of State John Kerry has been trying to promote by cozying up to his Russian counterpart.

However, by denying the mainstream of the Syrian opposition the defensive anti-aircraft and antitank weapons that they have been requesting for almost two years, while Russia and Iran were abundantly purveying the Syrian regime with weapons (and recently with combatants from Iran and its regional allies), the US administration only managed to achieve two results: on the one hand, it has allowed the Syrian regime to keep the upper hand militarily and thus to believe that it can win; hence, the regime has had no incentive whatsoever to make any concessions. On the other hand, benefitting from generous funding from Wahhabi sources and after an initial push from the Syrian regime itself (including the release of Jihadists from Syrian jails in the early phase of the uprising by a regime eager to portray the popular revolt as Sunni fundamentalist), Jihadist networks that were already present in neighbouring Iraq (where the Syrian regime itself contributed to their development) were able to impose themselves as an important component of the Syrian uprising.

That is why the Syrian people don’t trust Washington in the least. Witness this reportage in the *Washington Post*:

*Syrians would prefer to overthrow Assad without foreign help, but if the West does carry out strikes,*

*the Free Syrian Army intends to take advantage of any disarray in the ranks of regime forces to advance its own positions, said Louay al-Mokdad, political and media coordinator for the FSA.*

"We are going, for sure, to make the most of this operation to increase our situation on the ground, to try and control and liberate more areas," he said. "This is our right. Our fighters on the ground should use anything, even a change in the weather if it will help them, and if your enemy faces another side, we should use this."

However, those who support intervention expressed concerns about how the strikes would unfold and what effect they would have – if any – on the raging war that has killed more than 100,000 people.

"People here are very worried the strikes will be intended to help the regime," said Abu Hamza, an activist in the Damascus suburb of Darayya, where some of the fiercest battles of the war have left a town of nearly 500,000 a ravaged, emptied ruin. "Of course I support it if it means ending the bloodshed, but there has been killing for 2.5 years, so why should we believe the United States is serious now?"

"People lost trust in the U.S. government," he added. "They think the U.S. will only act for its own benefit."

Had Western powers really cared for the Syrian people – or even had Washington been more clever in creating the conditions for the compromise it has been seeking – it would have been easy for them to equip the Syrian opposition with defensive weapons, thus enabling the uprising to turn the tide of the war in such a way as to precipitate a break-up of the regime. Short of a decisive shift in the Syrian civil war to the disadvantage of the regime, the latter will remain intransigent and united around the Assad clan, and the war will drag on with its terrible consequences.

It is this reality that refutes the argument of many well-meaning people that arms should be denied to the Syrian opposition because the death toll will be increased. On the contrary, it is precisely the regime's advantage in weaponry that keeps the war going and the death toll increasing. Let me here repeat the words of the French revolutionary Gracchus Babeuf (1795) that I quoted in my latest book:

*"But what civil war is more revolting than the one that puts all the murderers on one side and all the defenceless victims on the other? Can you accuse someone who wants to arm the victims against the murderers of committing a crime?"*

In the face of the horrible crimes being perpetrated by the Assad regime with the support of Russia, Iran and Iran's allies, it is the duty of all those who claim to support the right of peoples to self-determination to help the Syrian people get the means of defending themselves.

**Gilbert Achcar**

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\* International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/> and:  
<http://www.opendemocracy.net/gilbert-achcar/welcoming-vote-of-british-parliament-while-supporting-syrian-uprising>

\* Gilbert Achcar grew up in Lebanon and teaches political science at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. Among his books are *The Clash of Barbarisms*, which came out in a second expanded edition in 2006; a book of dialogues with Noam Chomsky on the Middle East, *Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition in 2008); and most recently *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (2010). His next book analysing the Arab upheaval will come out in the spring of 2013.