

## Report

# New Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn and his Impact on British Foreign and Defence Policy

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Corbyn's first act as Labour leader was to attend a rally in support of refugees on Saturday [AP]

## Abstract

The election of Jeremy Corbyn as the leader of the British Labour party, the main opposition, has shaken up British politics especially in foreign affairs and defence. As a leading anti-war politician and long-time pro-Palestinian activist, his election threatens to open up a passionate and much needed debate about Britain's place in the world and the taking military action including in Syria. Corbyn will also challenge the government on thorny issues of human and workers' rights not least in relation to Israel and Saudi Arabia. This will end the cost cross-party consensus especially on Middle East policy.

## Introduction

British politics has experienced multiple shocks over the last year. Defying all the opinion polls, the Conservative party achieved a majority in the May 2015 general elections. In those elections, the Liberal Democrat vote collapsed to just eight seats whilst an insurgent Scottish National Party scooped up 56 out of 59 seats in Scotland. But the shock of shocks was the election on 12 September of the veteran hard-left Labour MP, Jeremy Corbyn to lead the Labour party.

Corbyn won comfortably too, achieving a considerable mandate from the grassroots of the party with almost 60 per cent of the 400,000 votes cast.<sup>(1)</sup> Labour also claims that over 60,000<sup>(2)</sup> people have joined the party since Corbyn took the helm. Nevertheless, within the Parliamentary Labour Party, he had precious few supporters. He did just scrape together the 35 Members of Parliament (MPs) necessary to nominate him at the last moment, but 14 of these backed other candidates. When considering any Corbyn political programme this has to be remembered – he has a Parliamentary party that does not share his core views. Many are just waiting for him to fail. He will have to find a way

to work constructively with them in a manner he has never had to in 35 years as a backbencher.

The end result is that there is a British conservative government under David Cameron with a wafer thin majority of twelve. Amongst his backbenchers, Cameron will have to face off arch Eurosceptics desperate for an in-out referendum on Europe. He also has a grouping opposed to further intervention overseas including against ISIS targets in Syria. The Scottish Nationalist Party has a highly anti-intervention, anti-arms sales and anti-nuclear deterrent position. And now there is a Labour party leader whose long-held views on foreign affairs are also very anti-war.

So just how will this shake up Britain's foreign and defence policy? Corbyn will certainly shake up the cozy cross-party consensus that has been the hallmark of British political debate on the Middle East for most of the last few decades.

However, Jeremy Corbyn has already had to concede on many issues of personal political importance to others in his party just to maintain some degree of unity. As the leader of the opposition, he will have a prominent platform to push for his policies of choice, but no guarantee that the party will adopt them. Yet unquestionably, Corbyn will focus in on policy areas other leaders have feared to go. Even if he does not win many of these arguments, he will guarantee debates on issues that rarely or briefly get the media spotlight.

### **Military intervention**

Deciding on going to war and military intervention are the toughest questions facing any government. In Britain this debate has become thornier since the interventions in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, the intervention in Libya, whilst not as costly in blood and treasure, has also not been perceived as a success. The British public, according to opinion polls, is intervention-averse. Politicians have started to reflect that. In 2013, David Cameron sought Parliamentary approval for strikes on Syria and lost the vote.

In 2014, action was approved in a Parliamentary vote against ISIS targets in Iraq but not Syria. Even at the time, many Conservative politicians questioned the logic of leaving ISIS a safe haven in Syria. Others were skeptical that bombing from the air would be sufficient. All of this had come after ISIS-committed atrocities in the Sinjar mountains and gruesome videos of beheadings of western hostages were publicised.

The option of extending British military action to include Syria is very much back on the agenda. There could be a vote on this in October 2015. Whilst the previous Labour leader, Ed Miliband, might have agreed to this extension under Jeremy Corbyn there is

no prospect of this happening. The SNP will also refuse to back this and there are a number of Conservative rebels.

What will this mean? The government may have to rely upon disgruntled Labour backbenchers to back any vote. There are enough Labour MPs who feel that action needs to be taken. According to the Sunday Times newspaper, at least half of Jeremy Corbyn's shadow cabinet would support strikes.<sup>(3)</sup> Both parties risk being divided on the issue.

Jeremy Corbyn will remain a staunch opponent of any British military intervention. He has made it clear that he could not commit forces to combat without a United Nations Security Council Resolution. When asked if there were circumstances in which he would go to war, Corbyn responded: Any? I am sure there are some. But I can't think of them at the moment."<sup>(4)</sup> Corbyn has never voted for war including over Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya.

Corbyn's policies would also unashamedly reduce Britain's ability to have a global military reach. He would prefer to slash defence spending as well as the nuclear deterrent. Once again, many in his party do not agree including the Shadow Foreign secretary, Hilary Benn. His "view is that we need to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent."<sup>(5)</sup> Jeremy Corbyn was dealt a blow when the Labour party decided not to debate Trident at the annual conference and therefore not vote on the issue. He continued to push the issue in his leader's speech to the conference on 29 September. The party needs to reach a conclusion on its position by the vote on renewal in 2016.

Similarly, unlike his leader, Benn does not want to see the UK leave NATO.<sup>(6)</sup> Corbyn's opponents will seek to question that he is serious on national security and unpatriotic. George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, is adamant that his colleagues must portray Labour as the problem and Corbyn merely as the symptom. He will argue that Corbyn represents the real Labour party.

## Syria

The question both party leaders still need to answer however, is what their ultimate strategy for resolving Syria actually is? Corbyn maintains that "there's got to be a political solution as quickly as possible" but this is little different to what Cameron says as well. Neither have defined a coherent strategy as yet.

The inability to conceive of a political solution to Syria which nearly all politicians know is required hampers western policy making. Formally, David Cameron remains wedded to the mantra that Assad must go but it is very clear that ministers and officials are reluctant to repeat this. Nevertheless, in evidence to the Foreign Affairs Select

Committee in September, the Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, did not rule out the possibility that Bashar Al Assad could remain in power for a short transition period before UN-monitored elections in Syria. For the moment the government's strategy is to focus on ISIS.

Jeremy Corbyn has had a different approach. He has never called for Bashar Al Assad to go and would support diplomatic engagement with the Syrian government. This would be consistent with his long-held policy positions of talking with those you may disagree with.

As the Leader of the Opposition, it is unlikely however, that he himself would engage in any form of meaningful contact. There is the possibility that if the Labour party decide to adopt this position that it could allow the British government to soften its line on talking to Damascus. Already the signs are that this is happening.

On the other hand, David Cameron may well wish to frame Jeremy Corbyn as weak in dealing with those who violate international law, focusing attention back on to his previous comments about his 'friends' in Hamas and Hizbollah. (7)

## Human Rights

The Corbyn response will unquestionably be what about the government's friends in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, governments that are also accused of grave human rights abuses. He has already written to the Prime Minister about the case of Abdallah Al Mohammed Baqr Al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia who is due to be executed despite being a minor when the crime was committed.(8) "Will you step in to terminate the Ministry of Justice's bid to provide services to the Saudi prisons system - the very body, I should stress, which will be responsible for carrying out Ali's execution?" Corbyn repeated the call in his conference speech as well as criticising the sale of British weapons to both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Corbyn knows that Cameron will be unwilling to criticise this key ally heavily in public.

On the human rights front, Corbyn has made clear that he wants a foreign policy that has an emphasis on human rights, justice and development around the world.(9) If handled with care, Corbyn can expect to retain considerable party support and even make a trade-oriented Conservative government feel uncomfortable. Selling arms to Israel and to Saudi Arabia are broadly opposed within the party but of course some Labour MPs and trade unions know that many thousands of jobs are at risk. Raising workers' rights in the Gulf will be welcomed especially in the broader Labour party where ethnic minorities form a key constituency.

## Palestine

Jeremy Corbyn is arguably the most pro-Palestinian leader in British political history. He has made it clear his views and positions will not change now he is leader. He is committed to recognizing Palestine. He will have to persuade his party if it takes up a position of calling for a ban on settlement products. It is likely he will clash with Cameron on this frequently especially in the event of any further conflagration on the ground.

On the issue of talking with Hamas, there has been some movement given that Tony Blair has engaged, according to media reports, with the leader of Hamas, Khaled Misha'al.<sup>(10)</sup> David Cameron has not commented on this at all. Exactly what sort of dialogue, discussion or negotiation Jeremy Corbyn would seek to have is not clear. Would Corbyn challenge Hamas on issues of war crimes, human rights, and attitudes towards Jews? If not he may leave himself vulnerable to charges of double standards himself.

## Conclusion

Predicting exactly how Labour party foreign and defence policy under Corbyn will eventually turn out to be is almost impossible to discern. Labour politicians consulted for this paper were all unsure and unwilling to make any predictions.

This might appear at first glance strange given that Jeremy Corbyn has campaigned consistently even during the leadership campaign on very clear principles in international relations. He is anti-war, anti-arms sales, anti-NATO, advocates human and workers rights. He believes in engaging those many others would shy away from. He is Eurosceptic and anti-US foreign policy.

Corbyn's positions are very clear but far more so than his predecessors, he will have to either win over his Parliamentary colleagues or compromise on his own steadfast principles. On the backbenches he was a campaigner who could afford the luxury in successive Parliaments of taking marginalised viewpoints. He now is in the very unaccustomed position of being a leader, has to manage a disparate team and marshal a consensus. It will be a delicate balancing act between his idealistic grassroots supporters and more politically hardened Parliamentary colleagues.

Everything therefore depends on his approach and handling of the situation. He could opt to reinforce his position by demonstrating his grassroots party backing, not least through re-empowering the Labour party conference as a decision making body and diluting Parliamentary input into the policy making machine. It appears this may be the tactic he will use on the key issue of his opposition to renewing Trident, Britain's nuclear

deterrent. This is a priority for Corbyn because the huge savings made by not doing this may form the central plank of his economic policy allowing for greater investment in public services.

But stretching party tensions to near splitting point, Jeremy Corbyn also admitted in a BBC interview that if he become Prime Minister, he would not use nuclear weapons.<sup>(11)</sup> In effect he would suspend Britain's nuclear deterrent. His Shadow Defence Secretary, Maria Eagle immediately described this as 'unhelpful.'<sup>(12)</sup> His Conservative opponents will leap on this with gusto.

Yet on the issue of taking military action in Syria it is not clear if Corbyn will allow his MPs a free vote or impose a three-line whip against action. Even his closest political ally John McDonnell wants a free vote but others oppose this. It is not clear that Corbyn can impose his view on the whole Parliamentary Labour Party on such a vital national issue. Much will depend on exactly how the British government presents the case for war in Syria and where it is compelling. Fortunately for Corbyn many of his MPs do not yet feel the case has been effectively made.

The question remains whether Corbyn possesses the political and leadership skills to pull this off. He will have to choose his battles carefully and demonstrate that the full package makes him electable as Prime Minister in 2020. Given his handsome electoral mandate his colleagues will probably shy away from challenging him just yet and wait at least until next May's local elections and the election to the Mayor of London before passing judgement.

For the Conservatives, there is a debate between those who want to attack Corbyn immediately, to others who advise a strategy of allowing a divided Labour party to do the job for them. Some even hope that Corbyn remains Labour leader for as long as possible as in their eyes it will maximise the damage.

One Tory was quoted saying: "This is proof that God is conservative."<sup>(13)</sup> Others are more cautious aware of just how unpopular career politicians are.

Cameron already has indicated his line of attack. Corbyn will be framed an unpatriotic and reckless with British national and economic security.

Jeremy Corbyn has a mammoth challenge. Many expect him to fail, to give up or to be forced out. Yet he is a determined man unlikely to want to bow out lamely. To convince his doubters he will have to demonstrate leadership over a divided party without losing himself in the process. He must develop a vision that goes beyond merely opposing. Corbyn has been an ardent critic of policies for years. He knows how to oppose but can

he find solutions that can deliver for the hundreds of thousands who have voted from him and believe in him?

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