

Without an agreement between the party leaders there is nothing further that Britain can do for Syria

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The recent attacks on Beirut, Paris and a Russian airliner flying over the Sinai desert indicate ISIS is growing bolder and the question of Britain's response has naturally returned to the fore. But **James Strong** argues that the latest international attack will change nothing about the politics of British policy in Syria due to the impasse created by Cameron and Corbyn's opposing world views.*



Paris Vigil on 14 November. Credit: [Garry Knight](#), Public Domain

Friday's horrific terrorist attacks on the streets of Paris change nothing about the politics of British policy in Syria. Jeremy Corbyn [remains implacably opposed](#) to the use of force as a tool of foreign policy, while David Cameron has little to offer beyond [refusing to help](#) his EU counterparts handle refugee flows, and [bombing](#). Most [MPs](#), like [most of the public](#), support some sort of action but few [seem to know](#) what exactly that action should be. And it will be impossible for Britain to act at all without agreement among party leaders with hugely different views of the world.

Two structural issues underpin this impasse. The first is institutional. By political convention, [parliament now gets the final say](#) when Britain goes to war. If Cameron wants to extend the RAF's present anti-ISIS operations into Syria, he will need to win a House of Commons vote. That [isn't a legal requirement](#) but, like most of the British constitution, it is a political expectation. He could ignore MPs without breaking any laws. But he would pay a political price he can ill afford given his small majority and the upcoming EU referendum.

Cameron's position is [complicated further](#) by the Fixed Term Parliaments Act. In a step not widely noted at the time, the Act surrendered the Prime Minister's historic ability to designate any parliamentary vote a motion of confidence in his or her administration. Previously PMs could offer recalcitrant back-benchers a choice: back me on this, or face a general election. Tony Blair effectively did as much over Iraq but Cameron does not have that option. His MPs can vote against him all they like. They can always rally round the leader if it comes to a formal confidence vote.

The second structural issue is political. There is no government less well able to win a parliamentary vote on military action than a weak Conservative one. The Coalition proved that when it lost the vote over Syria in August 2013. Most Conservative MPs support the use of force instinctively but most Labour MPs do not. A Labour government is

therefore more likely to win opposition support than a Conservative one: take, for example. Iain Duncan Smith's parliamentary troops backing Blair in the Iraq vote. Some MPs, from whatever party, will always oppose military action. The Conservatives do not like fighting what they consider other people's wars. Labour MPs rightly note that bombing kills innocent people. Weak governments wanting to use force need support from across the House to make up the numbers lost to rebellion.

That is where the gulf in ideas between Corbyn and Cameron comes in. Cameron learned from his [defeat over Syria](#). When he sought action [against ISIS](#) in September 2014, he made a deal with Ed Miliband: Britain would bomb in Iraq only and it would leave Syria for allied states. There were good strategic and legal arguments for doing this. The Iraqi government requested Britain aid its self-defence. The Syrian government did not, not least because Britain no longer recognises it. In Iraq Britain has firm grounds for action under international law, and partners to take and hold territory on the ground. In Syria it does not. It still looks somewhat odd, to attack ISIS in one half of its territory and not the other. Several MPs questioned the logic at the time and opinion polls [showed the public](#) did not care which side of the Iraqi-Syrian border British bombs fell. But Cameron and Miliband needed a compromise that delivered Labour votes while giving Miliband visible influence. Restricting British action to Iraq is what they picked.

ISIS is growing bolder. In recent weeks it has bombed Beirut and Metrojet 9268. It claimed Friday's massacres in Paris. The question of Britain's response will naturally return to the fore. We should not expect any new policies, however. Cameron seems unlikely to shift his stance on refugees. He believes admitting those smuggled into Europe encourages others. He prefers to provide aid to camps in the region and to offer asylum directly to those most in need. He also knows a strong anti-immigrant undercurrent amongst a wide range of voters risks the sort of backlash seen already in Germany and likely to follow in France. Corbyn, too, is hardly going to reverse a career spent campaigning against military interventions. He can, with some merit, frame Friday's attacks as another example of blowback from earlier wars. Without an agreement between the party leaders, without a political compromise package based on aid, diplomacy and force, there is nothing further that Britain can do for Syria. Doing something is simply not an option at this point.

Note: this post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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