

Jeremy Corbyn Calls for End to UK 'Arms Bazaar' Policy in Middle East. No More Weapons for Saudi Arabia

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Speaking to MEE, Labour leader calls for powers for Parliament to control arms sales to Saudi Arabia and oversee deployment of special forces

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has demanded a root-and-branch review of Britain's alliance with Saudi Arabia in the wake of the brutal Saudi interventions in Bahrain and the Yemen.



Corbyn: 'If we want to live in a world of peace, then there has to be a foreign policy that reflects that' (AFP)

Speaking to Middle East Eye, Corbyn called for a fundamental change in Britain's relationship with the Middle East, establishing a foreign policy based on democracy rather than military interventions. The Labour leader said that Britain's relationship with the Saudi monarchy should focus on human rights – not arms sales.

"We have got to look again at the whole arms relationship with Saudi Arabia and look again at the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia, sustained by the supply of arms largely, but not exclusively, from Britain which is used... both in Bahrain and in Yemen. Bahrain has now had significant Saudi involvement for quite a long time to prop up the regime there," Corbyn said.

The Labour leader claimed that the British government was responsible for the deaths of Bahraini protesters: "Well who's guilty? Who is responsible? Are we not responsible? We sold those arms knowing they were going to be used in Bahrain."

He said Britain was "incredibly selective" on human rights issues. "We sign up of course to the Universal Declaration, the European Convention and we do have the Arms Export Control Committee in Parliament, but we are actually very selective about this and we've done precious little about Saudi Arabia for a very long time."

Corbyn said that if he became prime minister he would reinstate human rights advisers in British embassies around the world, put human rights clauses in the contracts British firms make, and clamp down on arms sales: "If we want to live in a world of peace, live in a world of justice towards human rights, then there has to be a foreign policy that reflects that. That is where I'm at."

Call for war powers act

Breaking new ground, Corbyn called for an American-style “war powers act” to give Parliament new powers to block military intervention. He said the “parliamentary convention now requires that for the deployment of British troops there has to be a parliamentary mandate. Except – and they’ve all used the except – when there are special forces involved. The question of this of course goes back a long way to Vietnam in 1963, when the US managed to have I think 50,000 advisers to the South Vietnamese government before the Congress was even invited to vote on whether or not it should be involved in the Vietnam War. I think the parallel is a very serious one.”

He insisted that MPs should have oversight and control over when British special forces – and not only the regular army – get involved in combat.

Asked about MEE reports establishing the presence of British special forces in Libya, the Labour leader said: “Clearly Britain is involved. Either through special forces in Libya or through arms supplies to Saudi Arabia to the war in Yemen. And indeed by the same process to the supply of anti-personnel equipment that is being used in Bahrain by Saudi Arabia. So I think we have to have a War Powers Act that is much more watertight on this.”

He said the effect of British intervention in Libya has been to destroy the state and create in its place an arms bazaar: “A number of us pointed out in debates in the House at that time that if you simply destroyed the structure of the Libyan state, which is what happened, then you will end up with a series of warring factions.

And the spread of arms which were given to the opponents of Gaddafi has then spread into Mali and many other places. So we’ve actually created an arms bazaar of in some cases relatively small scale arms, but nevertheless very powerful ones.

Backing for Blair prosecution

Corbyn said he supported the families of British soldiers killed in Iraq in their efforts to bring a private prosecution against former prime minister Tony Blair.

He pointed to the words he used when he apologised on behalf of the Labour Party for the invasion of Iraq: “The words I said during the apology [were]: ‘those that are responsible for the war in Iraq must be prepared to face up to their responsibilities’.

“People must face up to their responsibilities for what they did. I met the families of the soldiers who died, and when you meet a family of anyone who has died it’s very hard. I meet the families of young people who have been stabbed to death. It’s very hard for them to understand their son’s life has gone through a random act of violence.

If you join the army, you join knowing there are risks involved. Obviously. And then you die in a war like Iraq. And then it becomes apparent that the war was based on misinformation or deception, that it wasn’t a necessary war, that it wasn’t a defensive war, and your son or daughter has died in that particular conflict. It’s very hard for those families to come to terms with that, so I spent

a lot of time over the past years talking to the families of those that have died. They are very, very impressive people. I think the way Reg Keys and Peter Bradley have conducted themselves is very, very impressive.

The families are appealing for funds to create a team of lawyers that will mount a private prosecution accusing Blair of “misfeasance in public office” on the grounds that he misused his constitutional powers, which led to mass casualties.

Corbyn told MEE he viewed the departure of Hilary Benn as shadow foreign secretary as a chance to develop Labour policy regarding Israel and Palestine.

He said that thanks to recent changes in Labour’s foreign affairs team “you will see more on this from me,” adding that “I will be developing foreign policy a great deal and my views and determination to promote a peace settlement in the Middle East which obviously has to involve recognition of Palestine as something that is very important to me.”

Confident mood

A tanned Corbyn, who on Thursday saw off a legal challenge over his place on the ballot for a new leadership contest brought by Labour MPs, appeared more relaxed and confident than at any time since he was elected Labour leader 10 months ago.

He laid down a clear marker to the majority of Labour MPs who had repeatedly called for him to step down. He said he was dismayed at the way they had launched a coup against him following the Brexit vote: “I was appalled at the way it was conducted and the way it was designed to cause maximum damage to the party day in day out. I was invited to resign. I absolutely refused to do so. I said I’m responsible for the people who elected me. I’m responsible for the mandate I was given. I will carry out that responsibility – and so I have.

I think some of them [Labour MPs] are confusing the position of the parliamentary party with the party as a whole. The parliamentary party is very, very important, but it is not the entirety of the Labour Party, and I have reached out in a way no other leader ever has in appointing people to my shadow cabinet last September who were very critical of me; some of whom remained critical within the shadow cabinet.

Corbyn said he expected more former shadow ministers who had joined the parliamentary revolt against him to return to the front bench, as MP Sarah Champion did this week.

The Labour leader spoke of his political heroes from the British radical dissenting tradition. He cited the British pamphleteer and political activist Tom Paine as one of his main influences and William Godwin as another, adding that “long-term political changes often come from quite profound and very brave individuals”.

When asked whether he saw himself in the tradition of Paine and Cobbett, Corbyn replied: “You don’t want to put yourself into history too quickly. But I do draw inspiration from those people that stood up in very difficult circumstances.”

Second referendum not ruled out

However, Corbyn notably failed to rule out a second referendum on last month's Brexit vote.

He ruled one out for "the immediate future," adding "one has to respect the result".

However, he added that "at some point in the future, somebody might say we ought to have a referendum on how we deal with the future with Europe".

The Labour leader presented himself as a new kind of political leader, challenging the elitist, modernising politics of Tony Blair and David Cameron.

The New Labour project was very much Third Way economics, it was aggressive foreign policy, and it was essentially marketisation of a lot of public services. I'm trying to take things in a very different direction of a human rights, democracy-based foreign policy rather than an interventionist one, and an economically interventionist economy in Britain in order to promote good-quality jobs and employment as well as promote decent levels of public service.

With Labour Party membership now more than half a million since his election and still growing, he claimed that he had brought a "new audience" into British politics.

I think there is, because it's an involvement of a new audience in politics who felt very disillusioned. It is very difficult to measure everything on the basis of personal contact, emails, postcards, whatever it happens to be. But I meet a significant number of people – a significant number of people have contacted me and said 'I've now become interested in politics because what I see with the Labour Party at the moment is that you're trying to reach out in a way that no one has reached out before.'

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