

There is no solution to the appalling catastrophe unfolding in front of our eyes in Syria. All we can hope for is the least bad of the options available to us, James Gray MP told his local newspaper..

Parliament was recalled following a chemicals weapon attack in Syria on the 21st August which killed over 3,000 people - the world's worst use of chemical weapons since the 1988 Halabaja massacre of Kurds by Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, Richard Graham MP told his constituents.

This caused over 3,000 casualties, many civilian and including considerable numbers of children. The Medecin Sans Frontieres filming of the effects of the attack is harrowing. This, and some fourteen other uses of chemical weapons, are currently being investigated by UN weapons inspectors. They will report back to the UN on what happened, though not to apportion blame.

The US, UK and French governments have all said they believe the chemical weapon attack was by the current Syrian government under Bashar al-Assad. This crossed a 'red line' for US President Obama and both PM Cameron and President Hollande joined Obama in saying something must be done - implying military action.

Foreign Secretary William Hague had earlier already promised Parliament that if there was any intention of military action in Syria then Parliament would have to debate and vote on this. (This was not the case in the US or France). The PM stuck to this pledge.

What evidence did the government produce about who used the chemical weapons and the legality of military action?

It made public yesterday the Joint Intelligence Committee's (JIC) analysis of responsibility for the chemical attack and a summary of the Attorney General's assessment of the legal case for military intervention.

The former said unambiguously the rebels couldn't have been behind the chemical attack and the latter argued there was legal justification for intervention on humanitarian grounds (ie reducing Assad's ability to use chemical weapons again).

What did the government motion actually call for?

The (unusually long) motion (only published the morning of the debate) focused on the immorality (under international law) of chemical weapons, the illegality of their use and their crime against humanity. It argued the principle of humanitarian intervention and that this might include 'military action that is legal, proportionate and focused on saving lives by preventing and deterring further use of Syria's chemical weapons'.

However the motion was also clear that the UN process should be followed ('as far as possible'), with the publication of the weapons inspectors' briefings and a further attempt to secure a UN Security Council resolution and consensus on a military response to the chemical weapons attack. It stated that before any 'direct British involvement in such action a further vote in the House of Commons will take place'. And it ruled out 'any action with wider objectives' (ie mission creep of eg regime change).

How did Coalition MPs feel about the motion?

I and several colleagues had already expressed real concern that the recall of Parliament was to authorise immediate action (alongside the US and because Obama's 'red line' had been crossed?): that there was a danger of premature commitment to something not properly considered or analysed, before weapons inspectors had reported, before diplomatic solutions within the UN had been showed to have been exhausted and before our constituents were remotely convinced this was the right thing to do.

It was unclear to me what the Syrian regime's motive for the chemical attack could have been, what the political goals for any military action by us were, nor the likelihood of success or indeed what the wider risks abroad and at home of taking action at all were.

Above all I understood the urge that 'something must be done' but felt that the shadow of the dodgy dossiers and un-thought out strategy and goals of the Iraq invasion was long and my constituents' strong urge was NOT to do something - or at least not yet.

So how did the government react and how did I vote?

I would not have backed military action last night, and many others felt the same way - on all sides of the House.

The PM recognised those concerns in several ways in the motion put forward. It ruled in the possibility of future military action but not its immediate authorisation - which would have needed a separate case and vote, as I emphasised in the debate.

I also believed that Assad (and other dictators) should not assume they would get away with chemical attacks, and SHOULD get the message that some permanent members of the UN Security Council are prepared, however reluctantly, to use force in certain circumstances to protect the slaughter of innocent people far away. The world cannot be proud of Srebrenica, Rwanda or even Halabaja. So I thought to exclude the possibility of any future military action was wrong; and I voted with a clear conscience for the motion.

What was the Labour amendment?

It looked to me largely a differently written version of the government motion. There was a nuance of not ruling out military action rather than ruling it in, and it had the additional feature of what the Opposition Leader called in debate a 'sequential roadmap' for decisions on military intervention.

This laid out that Labour would only support military action if the government had proved who was responsible for chemical breaches: that the UN Security Council had considered and voted on the issue (but not necessarily approved it ie they recognised the strong likelihood of a Russian veto); and that any action should be 'legal, proportionate, time limited, and have precise and time-limited objectives'.

I believe that the Labour roadmap was relevant to, and would have to be tackled at, any future debate and vote on authorising military action - but that it was not a reason to vote against the motion. Labour speakers, however, wanted to expunge the experience of Iraq and attached importance to the 'roadmap' and to the UN process in particular.

And other parties?

The DUP supported the government: the Welsh nationalists supported Labour. The SNP and the Green MP opposed both.

What was the result?

The Labour amendment to the motion was defeated by 112 votes and the government motion itself was defeated by 13 votes. Many Labour MPs voted against their own party's amendment because they wanted to rule out any possibility of military action, and some 30 Conservative MPs and 9 Lib Dem MPs voted against the Coalition motion for similar reasons.

What does it all mean?

Since Parliament did not approve either motion, the PM concluded in the House that democracy had spoken and that our constituents did not want any military intervention in Syria.

Who wins and loses from this?

It could be argued that the only real winner is Assad, who now knows Britain cannot join the US in any immediate military intervention and probably none ever in Syria: and the only real loser the Anglo/US relationship. Some will be more comfortable with that than others.

Some argue that the voice of the people was heard and Parliamentary democracy is the stronger for it: others that Labour played party politics and that the Opposition should have supported the government given such little difference of substance between the parties (although a minority of different views in both).

Others still - probably the easiest media headline - see the PM weakened by the government's failure to carry its motion. The BBC's Nick Robinson tweeted that the last time a Conservative lost a vote on a war was either in the 1780s or the 1860s. I found this curious: the motion was not for military intervention, still less war.

I think this was a good night for democracy in the short term. The nation's antipathy for military intervention, especially in the Middle East, is strong. I understand and sympathise with that and could not have supported a motion of immediate action.

But opinion is fickle, MPs are representatives not delegates and we have also to think about the nation's longer term interests. Dictators benefit most from our ruling out any possibility of military intervention. In my view Parliament, and perhaps Britain, will rue doing that and not being seen to be prepared to stand up more strongly for our values. Our allies will be at the least very disappointed.

Domestically, even though their own amendment was not adopted, the Labour Party enjoyed defeating the government last night. But the more thoughtful Opposition MPs will be wondering whether opportunism's triumph was at the cost of something bigger. Who knows if and when non interventionism will need to be re-visited. I do not believe David Miliband would have divided the House on this.

What happens next?

The PM will have told President Obama that British support for any US military intervention in Syria is ruled out. The government will focus on more of the considerable aid effort it has already put into helping with refugees in neighbouring countries.

There are those who simplistically argue that “It’s got nothing to do with us. Why should we police the world? We’ve had enough of that sort of thing in Iraq and Afghanistan. Let the Arab countries fight it out amongst themselves...” James Gray MP said. They are not only ignoring a humanitarian crisis and war crimes not seen at least since the Balkans, quite possibly since the Second World War; they are also foolishly

presuming that ‘our interests’ amount to little more than repelling boarders at the British coastline. Not only do we have a moral duty to prevent a brutal Hitler-esque dictator murdering people on a racist basis; but we must also be acutely aware of the forces which lie behind Assad and his regime.

It’s a cauldron of Sunni versus Shia; of Al-Qaeda sensing an opportunity in the chaos; of Hamas and Hezbollah advancing their campaigns against Israel; of a potentially nuclear-armed Iran and a selfishly-motivated Russia looming over the chaos like great black pariahs; of neighbouring Lebanon and Jordan on the brink of collapse not least because of the refugee crisis; and let’s not forget Egypt in civil war just round the Med, and most other Arab countries in a state of high tension.

Doing nothing is not an option; good men doing nothing allows evil to flourish. Doing nothing also risks catastrophic consequences for our own peace and security and prosperity at home.

Yet military action – even if that amounted to no more than a pre-emptive and punitive rocket strike against carefully selected targets – risks inflaming the conflict, and making us the enemy. Who knows what the end result would be? And we don’t even seem to know what end result we are seeking. If we simply want the end of the Assad regime as punishment for his vile crimes, then what do we want to replace it with; and how do we intend to achieve whatever end that might be? Is there not at least a risk of even greater chaos in an Assad-free Syria than there is at present?

So ‘jaw, jaw, jaw’ is without a doubt better than ‘war, war, war’. We must find a way of bringing all of the interested parties, including Russia, to the negotiating table in Geneva. We must bring every kind of diplomatic and trade pressure to bear on those who want war and destruction.

These are complex matters well beyond most of us to follow without access to the most secret of intelligence. That has led me in the past to argue that we in Parliament are no better able than any private citizen to judge and decide. Yet they are matters so grave and so momentous for the future of the Globe that it is unthinkable that we should dodge our responsibilities in the matter.

I will of course listen carefully to the arguments advanced on both sides; but at this stage at

least want to make it plain to my constituents that I can imagine no circumstances whatsoever under which I would vote for military action of any kind.