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House of Commons

Thursday 29 August 2013

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[*Mr Speaker in the Chair*]

Business of the House

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to Syria and the Use of Chemical Weapons not later than 10pm or six hours after their commencement, whichever is the later; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Mr Lansley*.)

Syria and the Use of Chemical Weapons

[*Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee on 16 July 2013, on Developments in UK Foreign Policy, HC 268-i.*]

Mr Speaker: We now come to the motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to Syria and the use of chemical weapons. The text of the motion that was submitted yesterday, as it appears on the Order Paper, was incorrect. A few words were omitted from line 16. As they are purely factual, I am content that the motion should be moved in a corrected form, a copy of which is available in the Vote Office.

I inform the House that I have selected manuscript amendment (b), which was submitted this morning in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. The text of the manuscript amendment is also available from the Vote Office.

I should also inform the House that I have set a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches in the debate.

2.36 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I beg to move,

That this House:

Deplores the use of chemical weapons in Syria on 21 August 2013 by the Assad regime, which caused hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries of Syrian civilians;

Recalls the importance of upholding the worldwide prohibition on the use of chemical weapons under international law;

Agrees that a strong humanitarian response is required from the international community and that this may, if necessary, require military action that is legal, proportionate and focused on saving lives by preventing and deterring further use of Syria's chemical weapons;

Notes the failure of the United Nations Security Council over the last two years to take united

action in response to the Syrian crisis;

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Notes that the use of chemical weapons is a war crime under customary law and a crime against humanity, and that the principle of humanitarian intervention provides a sound legal basis for taking action;

Notes the wide international support for such a response, including the statement from the Arab League on 27 August which calls on the international community, represented in the United Nations Security Council, to “overcome internal disagreements and take action against those who committed this crime, for which the Syrian regime is responsible”;

Believes, in spite of the difficulties at the United Nations, that a United Nations process must be followed as far as possible to ensure the maximum legitimacy for any such action;

Therefore welcomes the work of the United Nations investigating team currently in Damascus, and, whilst noting that the team’s mandate is to confirm whether chemical weapons were used and not to apportion blame, agrees that the United Nations Secretary General should ensure a briefing to the United Nations Security Council immediately upon the completion of the team’s initial mission;

Believes that the United Nations Security Council must have the opportunity immediately to consider that briefing and that every effort should be made to secure a Security Council Resolution backing military action before any such action is taken, and notes that before any direct British involvement in such action a further vote of the House of Commons will take place; and

Notes that this Resolution relates solely to efforts to alleviate humanitarian suffering by deterring use of chemical weapons and does not sanction any action in Syria with wider objectives.

May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for agreeing to our request to recall the House of Commons for this important debate?

The question before the House today is how to respond to one of the most abhorrent uses of chemical weapons in a century, which has slaughtered innocent men, women and children in Syria. It is not about taking sides in the Syrian conflict, it is not about invading, it is not about regime change, and it is not even about working more closely with the opposition; it is about the large-scale use of chemical weapons and our response to a war crime—nothing else.

Let me set out what the House has in front of it today in respect of how we reached our conclusions. We have a summary of the Government’s legal position, which makes it explicit that military action would have a clear legal basis.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the Prime Minister give way on that point?

The Prime Minister: In a moment.

We have the key independent judgments of the Joint Intelligence Committee, which make clear its view of what happened and who is responsible. We have a motion from the Government that sets out a careful path of steps that would need to be taken before Britain could participate in any direct military action. Those include the weapons inspectors reporting, further action at the United

Nations and another vote in this House of Commons. The motion also makes it clear that even if all those steps were taken, anything that we did would have to be

“legal, proportionate and focused on...preventing and deterring further use of Syria’s chemical weapons”.

Caroline Lucas: I am very grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way. Will he tell the House why he has refused to publish the Attorney-General’s full advice?

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Why has he instead published just a one-and-a-half-side summary of it, especially when so many legal experts are saying that without explicit UN Security Council reinforcement, military action simply would not be legal under international law?

The Prime Minister: There had been a long-standing convention, backed by Attorney-Generals of all parties and all Governments, not to publish any legal advice at all. This Government changed that. With the Libya conflict, we published a summary of the legal advice. On this issue, we have published a very clear summary of the legal advice and I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to read it.

Mr James Arbuthnot (North East Hampshire) (Con): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: I will make some progress and then I will take a huge number of interventions.

I am deeply mindful of the lessons of previous conflicts and, in particular, of the deep concerns in the country that were caused by what went wrong with the Iraq conflict in 2003. However, this situation is not like Iraq. What we are seeing in Syria is fundamentally different. We are not invading a country. We are not searching for chemical or biological weapons. The case for ultimately supporting action—I say “ultimately” because there would have to be another vote in this House—is not based on a specific piece or pieces of intelligence. The fact that the Syrian Government have, and have used, chemical weapons is beyond doubt. The fact that the most recent attack took place is not seriously doubted. The Syrian Government have said it took place. Even the Iranian President said that it took place. The evidence that the Syrian regime has used these weapons, in the early hours of 21 August, is right in front of our eyes. We have multiple eye-witness accounts of chemical-filled rockets being used against opposition-controlled areas. We have thousands of social media reports and at least 95 different videos—horrific videos—documenting the evidence.

The differences with 2003 and the situation with Iraq go wider. Then, Europe was divided over what should be done; now, Europe is united in the view that we should not let this chemical weapons use stand. Then, NATO was divided; today, NATO has made a very clear statement that those who are responsible should be held accountable. Back in 2003, the Arab League was opposed to action; now, it is calling for it. It has issued a statement holding the Syrian regime fully responsible and asking the international community to overcome internal disagreements and to take action against those who committed this crime.

Mr Arbuthnot: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. As he knows, a couple of days ago I expected to oppose the Government tonight, but is he aware that his determination to go down the route of the United Nations and his willingness to hold a further vote in this House will

be extremely helpful to me in making up my mind tonight?

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The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. In drawing up my motion I want to unite as much of the country and of this House as possible. I think it is right, on these vital issues of national and international importance, to seek the greatest possible consensus. That is the right thing for the Government to do and we will continue to do it.

The President of the United States, Barack Obama, is a man who opposed the action in Iraq. No one could in any way describe him as a President who wants to involve America in more wars in the middle east, but he profoundly believes that an important red line has been crossed in an appalling way, and that is why he supports action in this case. When I spoke to President Obama last weekend I said we shared his view about the despicable nature of this use of chemical weapons and that we must not stand aside, but I also explained to him that, because of the damage done to public confidence by Iraq, we would have to follow a series of incremental steps, including at the United Nations, to build public confidence and ensure the maximum possible legitimacy for any action. These steps are all set out in the motion before the House today.

I remember 2003. I was sitting two rows from the back on the Opposition Benches. It was just after my son had been born and he was not well, but I was determined to be here. I wanted to listen to the man who was standing right here and believe everything that he told me. We are not here to debate those issues today, but one thing is indisputable: the well of public opinion was well and truly poisoned by the Iraq episode and we need to understand the public scepticism.

Dame Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I am most grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way. My reading of his motion tells me that everything in it could have been debated on Monday. I believe that this House has been recalled in order to give cover for possible military action this weekend. Has the Prime Minister made it clear to President Obama that in no way does this country support any attack that could come before the UN inspectors have done their job?

The Prime Minister: I wanted the recall of this House in order to debate these absolutely vital national and international issues. I will answer the right hon. Lady's question directly: it is this House that will decide what steps we next take. If Members agree to the motion I have set down, no action can be taken until we have heard from the UN weapons inspectors, until there has been further action at the United Nations and until there is another vote in this House. Those are the conditions that we—the British Government, the British Parliament—are setting and it is absolutely right that we do so.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: Let me make a little more progress and then I will take interventions from across the House.

The deep public cynicism imposes particular responsibilities on me as Prime Minister to try to carry people in the country and people in this House with me. I feel that very deeply. That was why I wanted Parliament recalled, and I want this debate to bring the country together, not divide it. That is why I included in my motion, the Government motion, all the issues I could

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that were raised with me by the Leader of the Opposition and by many colleagues in all parts of the House—from the Liberal Democrat party, the Conservative party and others. I want us to try to have the greatest possible unity on the issue.

I have read the Opposition amendment carefully, and it has much to commend it. The need for the UN investigators to report—quite right. The importance of the process at the United Nations—quite right. The commitment to another vote in this House before any British participation in direct action—that is in our motion too.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: This is important; let me make this point.

However, I believe that the Opposition motion is deficient in two vital respects. First, it refers to the deaths on 21 August but does not in any way refer to the fact that they were caused by chemical weapons. That fact is accepted by almost everyone across the world, and for the House to ignore it would send a very bad message to the world.

Secondly, in no way does the Opposition motion even begin to point the finger of blame at President Assad. That is at odds with what has been said by NATO, President Obama and every European and regional leader I have spoken to; by the Governments of Australia, Canada, Turkey and India, to name but a few; and by the whole Arab League. It is at odds with the judgment of the independent Joint Intelligence Committee, and I think the Opposition amendment would be the wrong message for this House to send to the world. For that reason, I will recommend that my hon. Friends vote against it.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's decision to go through the UN process, but will he confirm to the House that were we to find during that process overwhelming opposition in the General Assembly and a majority against in the Security Council, as occurred 10 years ago, we would not then just motor on?

The Prime Minister: I think it would be unthinkable to proceed if there were overwhelming opposition in the Security Council.

Let me set out for the House why I think this issue is so important. The very best route to follow is to have a chapter VII resolution, take it to the UN Security Council, have it passed and then think about taking action. That was the path we followed with Libya.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I want to make this point, because I think it is very important.

However, it cannot be the case that that is the only way to have a legal basis for action, and we should consider for a moment what the consequences would be if that were the case. We could have a situation where a country's Government were literally annihilating half the people in that country, but because of one veto on the Security Council we would be hampered from taking

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any action. I cannot think of any Member from any party who would want to sign up to that. That is why it is important that we have the doctrine of humanitarian intervention, which is set out in

the Attorney-General's excellent legal advice to the House.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for taking the time to listen to the concerns of residents of Shrewsbury about yet further British military intervention in the middle east. However, why cannot our allies in the middle east, such as Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait, take military action? Why does it fall on us yet again?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and let us be clear that no decision about military action has been taken. It would require another vote of this House. However, if we wanted to see action that was purely about deterring and degrading future chemical weapons use by Syria—that is the only basis on which I would support any action—we would need countries that have the capabilities to take that action, of which the United States and the United Kingdom are two. There are very few other countries that would be able to do that.

Sir Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): On the matter of international law, did not the world leaders and the UN sign up unanimously in 2005 to the doctrine of the responsibility to protect, which means that if countries default on their responsibility to defend their own citizens, the international community as a whole has a responsibility to do so? Syria has defaulted on its responsibility to protect its own citizens, so surely now the international community and ourselves have a responsibility to undertake what we agreed to do as recently as 2005.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point that relates to what happened in Kosovo and elsewhere, but let me be clear about what we are talking about today: yes it is about that doctrine, but it is also about chemical weapons. It is about a treaty the whole world agreed to almost 100 years ago, after the horrors of the first world war. The question before us is this: is Britain a country that wants to uphold that international taboo against the use of chemical weapons? My argument is that yes, it should be that sort of country.

Mr Bob Ainsworth (Coventry North East) (Lab): The Prime Minister cites the issues relating to Iraq and the impact they have on decisions today, but the perception—a justifiable perception in my opinion—of his own preparedness to get involved in this conflict long before the current incident surely has an impact on the decisions of today.

The Prime Minister: What I would say to the right hon. Gentleman is that the case I am making is that the House of Commons needs to consider purely and simply this issue of massive chemical weapons use by this regime. I am not arguing that we should become more involved in this conflict. I am not arguing that we should arm the rebels. I am not making any of those arguments. The question before us—as a Government, as a House of Commons, as a world—is that there is the

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1925 post-first world war agreement that these weapons are morally reprehensible, so do we want to try to maintain that law? Put simply, is it in Britain's national interest to maintain an international taboo about the use of chemical weapons on the battlefield? My argument is: yes, it is. Britain played a part in drawing up that vital protocol—which, incidentally, Syria signed—and I think we have an interest in maintaining it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: Let me take an intervention from the Democratic Unionist party.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for giving way. I doubt there are many people in this House who do not believe that the debate is a prelude to a decision that will eventually see us involved in Syria. Will he explain why if, as the briefing states there have already been 14 instances of chemical weapons use, 100,000 people dead and 1.2 million people displaced, it is only now that the Prime Minister thinks that this is the time for greater intervention?

The Prime Minister: The point for considering this tougher approach is that we know there are the 14 uses of chemical weapons on a smaller scale—at least 14—and now we have this much larger use. This seems to me—and to President Obama, to President Hollande and to many others—an appropriate moment to ask whether it is time to do something to stand up for the prohibition against the use of chemical weapons. I cannot be accused on the one hand of rushing into something, while, on the other hand, being asked, “Why have you waited for 14 chemical weapons attacks before you do something?”

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: Let me make a little progress.

In my speech I want to do three things: explain what we know; set out the path we will follow; and try to answer all of the difficult questions that have been put to me. Let me try to make some progress and I promise I will take interventions as I go along. Let me set out what we know about what happened.

Médecins sans Frontières reported that in just three hours, on the morning of 21 August, three hospitals in the Damascus area received approximately 3,600 patients with symptoms consistent with chemical weapons attacks. At least 350 of those innocent people died. The video footage illustrates some of the most sickening human suffering imaginable. Expert video analysis can find no way that this wide array of footage could have been fabricated, particularly the behaviour of small children in those shocking videos.

There are pictures of bodies with symptoms consistent with that of nerve agent exposure, including muscle spasms and foaming at the nose and mouth. I believe that anyone in this Chamber who has not seen these videos should force themselves to watch them. One can never forget the sight of children’s bodies stored in ice, and young men and women gasping for air and suffering the most agonising deaths—all inflicted by weapons that have been outlawed for nearly a century.

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The Syrian regime has publicly admitted that it was conducting a major military operation in the area at that time. The regime resisted calls for immediate and unrestricted access for UN inspectors, while artillery and rocket fire in the area reached a level about four times higher than in the preceding 10 days. There is intelligence that Syrian regime forces took precautions normally associated with chemical weapons use.

Examining all this evidence, together with the available intelligence, the Joint Intelligence Committee has made its judgments, and has done so in line with the reforms put in place after the Iraq war by Sir Robin Butler. Today, we are publishing the key judgments in a letter from the

Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee. The letter states that

“there is little serious dispute that chemical attacks causing mass casualties on a larger scale than hitherto...took place on 21 August”.

On the Syrian opposition, the letter states:

“There is no credible intelligence or other evidence to substantiate the claims or the possession of CW”—

that is, chemical weapons—

“by the opposition.”

The Joint Intelligence Committee therefore concludes:

“It is not possible for the opposition to have carried out a CW attack on this scale.”

It says this:

“The regime has used CW on a smaller scale on at least 14 occasions in the past. There is some intelligence to suggest regime culpability in this attack. These factors make it highly likely that the Syrian regime was responsible.”

Crucially, the JIC Chairman, in his letter to me, makes this point absolutely clear. He says

“there are no plausible alternative scenarios to regime responsibility.”

I am not standing here and saying that there is some piece or pieces of intelligence that I have seen, or the JIC has seen, that the world will not see, that convince me that I am right and anyone who disagrees with me is wrong. I am saying that this is a judgment; we all have to reach a judgment about what happened and who was responsible. But I would put it to hon. Members that all the evidence we have—the fact that the opposition do not have chemical weapons and the regime does, the fact that it has used them and was attacking the area at the time, and the intelligence that I have reported—is enough to conclude that the regime is responsible and should be held accountable.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I am most grateful to the Prime Minister. What has convinced him—where is the evidence?—that an action by the international community would cease the use of chemical weapons within Syria, a country where the combatants have accepted 100,000 dead, millions of refugees and the continuing action that is totally destroying that country? Where is the evidence that convinces the Prime Minister that the external world can prevent this?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an extremely serious point. As I have just said, in the end there is no 100% certainty about who is responsible; you have to make a judgment. There is also no 100% certainty about what path of action might succeed or fail. But let me say this to the hon. Lady. I think we can be as certain as possible that a regime that has used chemical weapons on 14 occasions and is most likely responsible for this

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large-scale attack, will conclude, if nothing is done, that it can use these weapons again and again on a larger scale and with impunity.

People talk about escalation; to me, the biggest danger of escalation is if the world community—not just Britain, but America and others—stands back and does nothing. I think Assad will draw very clear conclusions from that.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Prime Minister is making a very powerful and heartfelt speech. Could he explain to the House why he thinks President Assad did this? There seems to be no logic to this chemical attack and that is what is worrying some people.

The Prime Minister: That is a very good question. If my hon. Friend reads the JIC conclusions, he will see that this is where it finds the greatest difficulty—*ascribing motives*. Lots of motives have been ascribed. For my part, I think the most likely possibility is that Assad has been testing the boundaries. At least 14 uses and no response—he wants to know whether the world will respond to the use of these weapons, which I suspect, tragically and repulsively, are proving quite effective on the battlefield. But in the end we cannot know the mind of this brutal dictator; all we can do is make a judgment about whether it is better to act or not to act and whether he is responsible or not responsible. In the end, these are all issues of judgment and as Members of Parliament, we all have to make them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I will take a question from the Scottish National party.

Mr MacNeil: I am very grateful to the Prime Minister. Does he know whether there were any plans over the last few days for any military action, before next week, planned at all against Syria?

The Prime Minister: One obviously cannot discuss the details of potential action in detail in front of this House, but I can tell the House that the American President and I have had discussions, which have been reported in the newspapers, about potential military action.

We have had those discussions and the American President would like to have allies alongside the United States with the capability and partnership that Britain and America have. But we have set out, very clearly, what Britain would need to see happen for us to take part in that—more action at the UN, a report by the UN inspectors and a further vote in this House. Our actions will not be determined by my good friend and ally the American President; they will be decided by this Government and votes in this House of Commons.

Hugh Bayley (York Central) (Lab): I agree with the Prime Minister about the horror of chemical weapons, but the vast majority of the 100,000 killed so far in this civil war in Syria have died as a result of conventional weapons. Can he convince the House that military

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action by our country would shorten the civil war and help herald a post-war Government who could create stability?

The Prime Minister: It is a good question, but I am afraid that I cannot make any of those

assurances. Obviously, we have not made that decision, but were we to make a decision to join the Americans and others in military action, it would have to be action, in my view, that was solely about deterring and degrading the future use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime—full stop, end of story. By the way, if we were aware of large-scale use of chemical weapons by the opposition, I would be making the same argument from the same Dispatch Box and making the same recommendations.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for standing tall and for supporting Britain's historical tradition of always standing against mass murder by dictators and tyrants. Does he not agree that there is a humanitarian case for intervention, especially given what happened in recent history in Halabja in 1988, when 5,000 Kurds were killed with mustard gas?

The Prime Minister: I applaud my hon. Friend for always standing up against genocide, wherever it takes place in the world. It may well be that the fact that no action was taken over Halabja was one of the things that convinced President Assad that it was okay to build up an arsenal of chemical weapons.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I am going to make some progress. As I said, the second part of my speech deals with the actions set out in our motion. I want to address those and then I will take some more interventions.

Whatever disagreements there are over the complex situation in Syria, I believe that there should be no disagreement that the use of chemical weapons is wrong. As I said, almost a century ago the world came together to agree the 1925 treaty and to outlaw the use of chemical weapons, and international law since that time has reflected a determination that the events of that war should never be repeated. It put a line in the sand; it said that, whatever happens, these weapons must not be used. President Assad has, in my view, crossed that line and there should now be consequences. This was the first significant use of chemical weapons this century and, taken together with the previous 14 small-scale attacks, it is the only instance of the regular and indiscriminate use of chemical weapons by a state against its own people for at least 100 years.

Interfering in another country's affairs should not be undertaken except in the most exceptional circumstances. There must be, as my hon. Friend has just said, a humanitarian catastrophe, and the action must be a last resort. By any standards, this is a humanitarian catastrophe and if there are no consequences for it, there will be nothing to stop Assad and other dictators using these weapons again and again. As I have said, doing nothing is a choice—it is a choice with consequences. These consequences would not just be about President Assad and his future use of chemical weapons; decades of painstaking work to construct an international system

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of rules and checks to prevent the use of chemical weapons and to destroy stockpiles will be undone. The global consensus against the use of chemical weapons will be fatally unravelled. A 100-year taboo will be breached. People ask about the British national interest. Is it not in the British national interest that rules about chemical weapons are upheld? In my view, of course it is, and that is why I believe we should not stand idly by.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Notwithstanding the differences I have with the Prime

Minister on the issue of timing and his approach to conflict, may I raise the issue of consequences? Does he agree that whoever is responsible for a chemical weapons attack should know that they will face a court, be it the International Criminal Court or a specially convened war crimes tribunal in the future, because whether there is military intervention or not, somebody is responsible for a heinous crime and they should face the law?

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree that people should be subject to the ICC and, of course, possession and use of chemical weapons is a crime and can be prosecuted, but we have to recognise the slowness of those wheels and the fact that Syria is not even a signatory to that treaty.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: Let me make a little more progress and then I will give way.

As I have said, I have consulted the Attorney-General and he has confirmed that the use of chemical weapons in Syria constitutes both a war crime and a crime against humanity. I want to be very clear about the process that we follow—the motion is clear about that. The weapons investigators in Damascus must complete their work. They should brief the United Nations Security Council. A genuine attempt should be made at a condemnatory chapter VII resolution, backing all necessary measures. Then, and only then, could we have another vote of this House and British involvement in direct military action. I have explained, again, the legal position and I do not need to repeat it, but I urge colleagues to read this legal advice, which I have put in the Library of the House of Commons. But let me repeat, one more time, that we have not reached that point—we have not made the decision to act—but were there to be a decision to act, this advice proves that it would be legal.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that our constituents are concerned about Britain's becoming involved in another middle eastern conflict, whereas he is focusing specifically on the war-crimes use of chemical weapons, which is a very different matter from Britain's being involved in a protracted middle eastern war?

The Prime Minister: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I am fully aware of the deep public scepticism and war-weariness in our country, linked to the difficult economic times people have had to deal with, and that they are asking why Britain has to do so much in the world. I totally understand that, and we should reassure

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our constituents that this is about chemical weapons, not intervention or getting involved in another middle eastern war.

Mr Jack Straw (Blackburn) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: I give way to the former Home Secretary.

Hon. Members: And former Foreign Secretary, Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice.

Mr Straw: And Member of Parliament for Blackburn.

The Prime Minister said a moment ago, within the hearing of the House, that one of the purposes

of any action would be the “degrading” of the Assad regime’s chemical weapons capability. In a letter that General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sent to Carl Levin, of the United States Congress, a couple of months ago, he spelt out that fully to do that would involve hundreds of ships and aircraft and thousands of ground troops, at a cost of \$1 billion a month. Given that the Prime Minister is not proposing that, could he say what his objective would be in degrading the chemical weapons capability?

The Prime Minister: Of course, the right hon. Gentleman has had many jobs—Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary and so on—so perhaps I should just refer to him as “my constituent”. That is probably safer.

The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, however. I think that the Dempsey letter was addressing the point that if we wanted entirely to dismantle, or to attempt to dismantle, Syria’s weapons arsenal, that would be an enormous undertaking which would involve ground troops and all sorts of things, but that is not what is being proposed; the proposal, were we to take part, would be to attempt to deter and degrade the future use of chemical weapons. That is very different. I do not want to set out at the Dispatch Box a list of targets, but it is perfectly simple and straightforward to think of actions that we could take relating to the command and control of the use of chemical weapons, and the people and buildings involved, that would indeed deter and degrade. Hon. Members will ask this point in several different ways: how can we be certain that any action will work and would not have to be repeated? Frankly, these are judgment issues, and the only firm judgment I think we can all come to is that if nothing is done, we are more likely to see more chemical weapons used.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Although the Joint Intelligence Committee says it is baffled about the motivation for Assad’s use of chemical weapons, it says it has

“a limited but growing body of intelligence which supports the judgment that the regime was responsible”.

I appreciate that the Prime Minister cannot share such intelligence with the House as a whole, but members of the all-party Intelligence and Security Committee have top-secret clearance to look at precisely this sort of material. As some of its members support and others oppose military intervention, would he be willing for them to see that material?

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The Prime Minister: I am happy to consider that request, because the ISC plays a very important role, but I do not want to raise, as perhaps happened in the Iraq debate, the status of individual or groups of pieces of intelligence into some sort of quasi-religious cult. That would not be appropriate. I have told the House that there is an enormous amount of open-source reporting, including videos that we can all see. Furthermore, we know that the regime has an enormous arsenal, that it has used it before and that it was attacking that area. Then, of course, there is the fact that the opposition does not have those weapons or delivery systems and that the attack took place in an area that it was holding. So, yes, intelligence is part of this picture, but let us not pretend that there is one smoking piece of intelligence that can solve the whole problem. This is a judgment issue; hon. Members will have to make a judgment.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for being generous in giving way.

The reason many of us in Parliament oppose arming the rebels is not only that atrocities have been committed by both sides in this vicious civil war, but that there is a real risk of escalating the violence and therefore the suffering. No matter how clinical the strikes, there is a real risk that they would result only in escalating the violence. What assurances can the Prime Minister give, therefore, that this will not escalate violence either within the country or beyond Syria's borders?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend and I have not agreed on every aspect of Syrian policy, as is well known. If we were to take action, it would be purely and simply about degrading and deterring chemical weapons use. We worry about escalation, but the greatest potential escalation is the danger of additional chemical weapons use because nothing has been done. This debate and this motion are not about arming the rebels or intervening in the conflict, or about invasion or changing our approach to Syria. They are about chemical weapons—something in which everyone in this House has an interest.

Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con): The use of chemical weapons has made Syria our business. Does the Prime Minister agree that to miss the opportunity we have today to send a strong message to Assad and others that this House condemns this war crime, the use of chemical weapons, and will stand by our obligations to deter them would be to undermine our own national security?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. One of the questions our constituents ask most is where the British national interest is in all of this. I would argue that a stable middle east is in the national interest, but there is a specific national interest relating to the use of chemical weapons and preventing its escalation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I will give way a bit more in a minute, but I want to make some further progress and leave plenty of time for Back-Bench speeches.

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In this section of my speech, I have tried to address the questions that people have. Let me take the next one: whether we would be in danger of undermining our ambitions for a political solution in Syria. There is not some choice between, on the one hand, acting to prevent chemical weapons being used against the Syrian people and, on the other, continuing to push for a long-term political solution. We need to do both. We remain absolutely committed to using diplomacy to end this war with a political solution.

Let me make this point. For as long as Assad is able to defy international will and get away with chemical attacks on his people, I believe that he will feel little if any pressure to come to the negotiating table. He is happy to go on killing and maiming his own people as part of his strategy for winning that brutal civil war. Far from undermining the political process, a strong response over the use of chemical weapons in my view could strengthen it.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): One of the consequences of intervening will be the effect that it will have on other countries in the region, and my particular concern—as the Prime Minister knows—is Yemen, the most unstable country in the area. Has he looked at the possible consequences of intervention and the effect that it will have on the stability of a country such as Yemen?

The Prime Minister: I have taken advice from all of the experts about all the potential impacts on the region, which in fact is the next question in my list of questions that need to be answered. The region has already been profoundly endangered by the conflict in Syria. Lebanon is facing sectarian tensions as refugees pile across the border. Jordan is coping with a massive influx of refugees. Our NATO ally Turkey has suffered terrorist attacks and shelling from across the border. Standing by as a new chemical weapons threat emerges in Syria will not alleviate those challenges; it will deepen them. That is why the Arab League has been so clear in condemning the action, in attributing it precisely to President Assad and in calling for international action. This is a major difference from past crises in the middle east, and a region long beset by conflict and aggression needs above all clear international laws and people and countries who are prepared to stand up for them.

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): I believe that my constituents, like those of the rest of the House, want the Prime Minister to make clear on behalf of this country that we will not turn away from the illegal use of chemical weapons, but that we will give peace a chance. Will he assure us that he will continue to engage—however difficult it is—with Russia and the other key countries to try to make sure that the UN route is productive and that the diplomatic process is engaged again as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend that we must continue the process of diplomatic engagement. Even after I had spoken to President Obama before the weekend, I called President Putin on Monday and had a long discussion with him about this issue. We are a long way apart, but the one issue about which we do agree is the need to get the Geneva II process going.

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The assurance I can give my right hon. Friend is that any action would be immediately taken over by running a political process once again and that Britain will do everything in its power to help make that happen.

Let me answer a final question that has been put in the debate over recent days: whether this will risk radicalising more young Muslims, including people here in Britain. This is a vital question, and it is one that was not asked enough in 2003. This question was asked at the National Security Council yesterday, and we have received considered analysis from our counter-terrorism experts. Their assessment is that, while as ever there is no room for complacency, the legal, proportionate and focused actions that would be proposed will not be a significant new cause of radicalisation and extremism. I would make this point: young Muslims in the region and here in Britain are looking at the pictures of Muslims suffering in Syria, seeing the most horrific deaths from chemical weapons and many of them may be asking whether the world is going to step up and respond, and I believe that the right message to give to them is that we should.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I will take one more intervention.

Mr Tom Clarke (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister reflect on the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) on the humanitarian situation, not just as it might appear in the future, but as it happens now, with thousands of refugees going to neighbouring countries? Given that aid agencies such as CAFOD

have said that this is the worst situation of the 21st century, how can we be absolutely sure that we will not add in the neighbouring countries, including those in north Africa, to the problems that we are facing?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point, and we should be proud in the House and this country of the massive role that aid agencies and British aid money are playing in relieving this disastrous humanitarian situation. We are one of the largest donors, and we will go on making that investment because we are saving lives and helping people every day. But we have to ask ourselves whether the unfettered use of chemical weapons by the regime will make the humanitarian situation worse, and I believe that it will. If we believed that there was a way to deter and degrade future chemical weapons action, it would be irresponsible not to do it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: Let me just make this point. When people study the legal advice published by the Government, they will see that it makes the point that the intervention on the basis of humanitarian protection has to be about saving lives.

Let me conclude where I began. The question before us is how to respond to one of the worst uses of chemical weapons in a hundred years. The answer is that we must do the right thing and in the right way. We must be sure to learn the lessons of previous conflicts.

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We must pursue every avenue at the United Nations, every diplomatic channel and every option for securing the greatest possible legitimacy with the steps that we take, and we must recognise the scepticism and concerns that many people in the country will have after Iraq, by explaining carefully and consistently all the ways in which this situation and the actions that we take are so very different. We must ensure that any action, if it is to be taken, is proportionate, legal and specifically designed to deter the use of chemical weapons. We must ensure that any action supports and is accompanied by a renewed effort to forge a political solution and relieve humanitarian suffering in Syria. But at the same time, we must not let the spectre of previous mistakes paralyse our ability to stand up for what is right. We must not be so afraid of doing anything that we end up doing nothing.

Let me repeat that there will be no action without a further vote in the House of Commons, but on this issue Britain should not stand aside. We must play our part in a strong international response; we must be prepared to take decisive action to do so. That is what today's motion is about, and I commend it to the House.

3.17 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I beg to move manuscript amendment (b), leave out from 'House' to end and add—

'expresses its revulsion at the killing of hundreds of civilians in Ghutah, Syria on 21 August 2013; believes that this was a moral outrage; recalls the importance of upholding the worldwide prohibition on the use of chemical weapons; makes clear that the use of chemical weapons is a grave breach of international law; agrees with the UN Secretary General that the UN weapons

inspectors must be able to report to the UN Security Council and that the Security Council must live up to its responsibilities to protect civilians; supports steps to provide humanitarian protection to the people of Syria but will only support military action involving UK forces if and when the following conditions have been met that:

- (a) the UN weapons inspectors, upon the conclusion of their mission in the Eastern Ghutah, are given the necessary opportunity to make a report to the Security Council on the evidence and their findings, and confirmation by them that chemical weapons have been used in Syria;
- (b) compelling evidence is produced that the Syrian regime was responsible for the use of these weapons;
- (c) the UN Security Council has considered and voted on this matter in the light of the reports of the weapons inspectors and the evidence submitted;
- (d) there is a clear legal basis in international law for taking collective military action to protect the Syrian people on humanitarian grounds;
- (e) such action must have regard to the potential consequences in the region, and must therefore be legal, proportionate, time-limited and have precise and achievable objectives designed to deter the future use of prohibited chemical weapons in Syria; and
- (f) the Prime Minister reports further to the House on the achievement of these conditions so that the House can vote on UK participation in such action, and that any such vote should relate solely to efforts to deter the use of chemical weapons and does not sanction any wider action in Syria.’.

I start by joining the Prime Minister in expressing revulsion at the killing of hundreds of innocent civilians in Ghutah on 21 August. This was a moral outrage, and the international community is right to condemn it. As the Prime Minister said, everyone in the House and

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most people in the country will have seen the pictures of men, women and children gasping for breath and dying as a result of this heinous attack. I can assure hon. Members that the divide that exists does not exist over the condemnation of the use of chemical weapons and the fact that it breaches international law; nor does it lie in the willingness to condemn the regime of President Assad. The question facing this is House is what, if any, military action we should take and what criteria should determine that decision. That is what I want to focus on in my speech today.

It is right to say at the beginning of my remarks that the Prime Minister said a couple of times in his speech words to the effect that, “We are not going to get further involved in that conflict. This does not change our stance our Syria.” I have got to say to the Prime Minister, with the greatest respect, that that is simply not the case. For me that does not rule out military intervention—I want to be clear about this—but I do not think anybody in this House or in the country should be under any illusions about the effect on our relationship to the conflict in Syria if we were to intervene militarily. As I say, and as I shall develop in my remarks, that does not, for me, rule out intervention, but we need to be clear-eyed about the impact that this would have.

Let me also say that this is one of the most solemn duties that this House possesses, and in our minds should be this simple question: in upholding international law and legitimacy, how can we make the lives of the Syrian people better? We should also have in our minds—it is right to

remember it on this occasion—the duty we owe to the exceptional men and women of our armed forces and their families, who will face the direct consequences of any decision we make.

The basis on which we make this decision is of fundamental importance, because the basis of making the decision determines the legitimacy and moral authority of any action that we undertake. That is why our amendment asks the House to support a clear and legitimate road map to decision on this issue—a set of steps that will enable us to judge any recommended international action. I want to develop the argument about why I believe this sequential road map is the right thing for the House to support today.

Most of all, if we follow this road map, it can assure the country and the international community that if we take action, we will follow the right, legitimate and legal course, not an artificial timetable or a political timetable set elsewhere. I think that is very important for any decision we make. This is fundamental to the principles of Britain: a belief in the rule of law and a belief that any military action we take must be justified in terms of the cause and also the potential consequences. We should strain every sinew to make the international institutions that we have in our world work to deal with the outrages in Syria.

Let me turn to the conditions in our amendment. First—this is where the Prime Minister and I now agree—we must let the UN weapons inspectors do their work and let them report to the Security Council. Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary-General, yesterday said about the weapons inspectors:

“Let them conclude their work for four days and then we will have to analyse scientifically with experts and then...we will have to report to the Security Council for any actions.”

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The weapons inspectors are in the midst of their work and will be reporting in the coming days. That is why today could not have been the day on which the House was asked to decide on military action. It is surely a basic point for this House that evidence should precede decision, not decision precede evidence. I am glad that, on reflection, the Prime Minister accepted this yesterday.

Now it is true—some have already raised this issue—that the weapons inspectors cannot reach a judgment on the attribution of blame. That is beyond their mandate. Some might think that that makes their work essentially irrelevant. I disagree. If the UN weapons inspectors conclude that chemical weapons have been used, in the eyes of this country and of the world that will confer legitimacy on the finding beyond the view of any individual country or any intelligence agency. What is more, it is possible that what the weapons inspectors discover could give the world greater confidence in identifying the perpetrators of this horrific attack.

The second step in our road map makes it clear that there must be compelling evidence that the Syrian regime was responsible for the attack. I welcome the letter from the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee today, and I note the Arab League’s view of President Assad’s culpability. Of course, as the Prime Minister said, in conflict there is always reason for doubt, but the greater the weight of evidence the better. On Tuesday we were promised the release of American intelligence to prove the regime’s culpability. We await publication of that evidence, which I gather will be later today. That evidence, too, will be important in building up the body of evidence to show that President Assad was responsible.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition has said that he might be able to support military action of the kind that the Government are contemplating. He has put in his amendment a list of the requirements, virtually all of which, as far as I can tell, appear in the Government's own motion. Why can he not, therefore, support the Government's motion, in order that this House could speak with a united voice to the world on this matter?

Edward Miliband: I will develop in my remarks why I do not think that is the case. In particular, I would point to the fact that the Government's motion does not mention compelling evidence against President Assad, and I will develop later in my remarks the fifth point in our amendment, which is very, very important—the basis on which we judge whether action can be justified in terms of the consequences.

The third step is that, in the light of the weapons inspectors' findings and this other evidence, and as the Secretary-General said, the UN Security Council should then debate what action should be taken, and indeed should vote on action. I have heard it suggested that we should have "a United Nations moment". They are certainly not my words; they are words which do no justice to the seriousness with which we must take the United Nations. The UN is not some inconvenient sideshow, and we do not want to engineer a "moment". Instead, we want to adhere to the principles of international law.

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Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): I very much welcome the right hon. Gentleman's doctrine that evidence should precede decision; that is a stark change from at least one of his predecessors. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] Does he believe that the evidence that has been presented to us today by the Joint Intelligence Committee is compelling or not?

Edward Miliband: I think it is important evidence, but we need to gather further evidence over the coming days. That is part of persuading the international community and people in this country of President Assad's culpability, and I think that is important. Let me also come to the hon. Gentleman's earlier point, though, because the Prime Minister raised it too. I am very clear about the fact that we have got to learn the lessons of Iraq. Of course we have got to learn those lessons, and one of the most important lessons was indeed about respect for the United Nations, and that is part of our amendment today.

On the question of the Security Council, I am also clear that it is incumbent on us to try to build the widest support among the 15 members of the Security Council, whatever the intentions of particular countries. The level of international support is vital, should we decide to take military action. It is vital in the eyes of the world. That is why it cannot be seen as some sideshow or some "moment", but is an essential part of building the case, if intervention takes place.

Andrew Selous *rose—*

Mr MacNeil *rose—*

Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD) *rose—*

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab) *rose—*

Edward Miliband: I give way to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert).

Dr Huppert: The Leader of the Opposition is right that the UN Security Council should not be just a sideshow, but why does his amendment merely say that the Security Council should have voted on the matter, rather than that it should have voted in favour of some intervention?

Edward Miliband: I will come directly to that question. It is because there will be those who argue that in the event of Russia and China vetoing a Security Council resolution, any military action would necessarily not be legitimate. I understand that view but I do not agree with it. I believe that if a proper case is made, there is scope in international law—our fourth condition—for action to be taken even without a chapter VII Security Council resolution. Kosovo in 1999 is the precedent cited in the Prime Minister’s speech and in the Attorney-General’s legal advice; but the Prime Minister did not go into much detail on that advice.

It is worth noting that in the Attorney-General’s legal advice there are three very important conditions. The first condition is that there must be

“convincing evidence, generally accepted by the international community as a whole, of extreme humanitarian distress”.

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The second is that

“it must be objectively clear that there is no practicable alternative to the use of force if lives are to be saved”.

That is a testing condition, which we need to test out in the coming days and the coming period. Thirdly,

“the proposed use of force must be...proportionate...and...strictly limited in time”.

So the Attorney-General concludes in his advice—it is very important for the House to understand this—that there could be circumstances, in the absence of a chapter VII Security Council resolution, for action to be taken, but subject to those three conditions. That is the case that must be built over the coming period. These principles reflect the responsibility to protect, a doctrine developed since Kosovo which commands widespread support.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right; I did not cover everything in my speech. I could have gone into more detail on the Attorney-General’s advice. The Leader of the Opposition mentioned the three conditions. I just thought for the clarity of the House, for those who might not have had time to read it, I would point out that the very next sentence of the Attorney-General’s advice is:

“All three conditions would clearly be met in this case”.

Edward Miliband: Well, that is the Attorney-General’s view—*[Interruption.]* That is the view that needs to be tested out over the coming period. Of course that is the case and a judgment will have to be made. Additionally, the responsibility to protect also demands a reasonable prospect of success in improving the plight of the Syrian people, and that responsibility is an essential part of making this case. That takes me to the final point of the road map we propose.

Glenda Jackson: I am referring to the fourth paragraph of our road map. My right hon. Friend has

already touched on the fact that any action must be legal, proportionate and time-limited, but the amendment goes on to say that it must have “precise and achievable objectives”. Will he detail what those objectives are?

Edward Miliband: I am coming exactly to that point, which is that the Government need to set that out in the coming days. That takes me precisely to the final point of the road map. Any military action must be specifically designed to deter the future use of chemical weapons; it must be time-limited with specific purpose and scope so that future action would require further recourse to this House; and it must have regard for the consequences of any action. We must ensure that every effort is made to bring the civil war in Syria to an end, and principal responsibility for that rests, of course, with the parties in that conflict, and in particular President Assad.

Mr Brazier: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Edward Miliband: I want to make a bit more progress.

The international community also has a duty to do everything it can to support the Geneva II process, and any action we take—this is the key point—must assist that process and not hinder it. That is the responsibility that lies on the Government and their allies—to set out that case in the coming period.

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There will be some in this House who say that Britain should not contemplate action even when it is limited, because we do not know precisely the consequences that will follow. As I said, I am not with those who rule out action, and the horrific events unfolding in Syria ask us to consider all available options, but we owe it to the Syrian people, to our own country and to the future security of our world to scrutinise any plans on the basis of the consequences they will have. By setting a framework today, we give ourselves time and space to scrutinise what is being proposed by the Government, to see what the implications are.

Mr Baron: For the sake of clarity for the House, can the right hon. Gentleman tell us whether, if there was no UN Security Council resolution, the Labour Opposition would back military intervention?

Edward Miliband: It depends on the case that has been set out and the extent to which international support has been developed—*[Interruption.]* I say to hon. Members on the Government Benches who are making strange noises that it is right to go about this process in a calm and measured way. If people are asking me today to say, “Yes, now, let us take military action,” I am not going to say that, but neither am I going to rule out military action, because we have to proceed on the basis of evidence and the consensus and support that can be built.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Glenda Jackson) asked an important question that I feel the right hon. Gentleman did not answer fully. Paragraph (e) of the Opposition amendment refers to “precise and achievable objectives”, which I assume means that he has in mind precise and achievable objectives. Can he please detail what they would be?

Edward Miliband: Yes I can, because the amendment goes on to say,

“designed to deter the future use of prohibited chemical weapons in Syria”.

Paragraph (e) also states that

“such action must have regard to the potential consequences in the region”,

so any proposed action to deter the use of chemical weapons must be judged against the consequences that will follow. Further work by the Government is necessary to set out what those consequences would be.

Mr Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): On consequences, I am listening carefully to the Leader of the Opposition and he is effectively making a strong case against military action. The consequences of the military action envisaged are very unquantifiable, because the objectives are, frankly, pretty soft in terms of degrading and deterring and of the link between military effect and the actual effect on the ground. He has also linked this to the consequences for the Geneva II process, which can only be negative.

Edward Miliband: I am saying to the hon. Gentleman and the House that over the coming period, we have to assess in a calm and measured way—not in a knee-jerk way, and not on a political timetable—the advantages

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of potential action, whether such action can be taken on the basis of legitimacy and international law, and what the consequences would be.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): Listening to the right hon. Gentleman’s speech, any reasonable human being would assume that he is looking to divide the House for political advantage. What has happened to the national interest?

Edward Miliband: That intervention is not worthy of the hon. Gentleman. I am merely trying to set out a framework for decision for the House. My interest all along has been to ensure that the House of the Commons can make the decision, and do so when the evidence is available. Some in the House believe that the decision is simple—clearly there are such Members on the Government Benches. Some think we can make the decision now to engage in military conflict. Equally, others believe we can rule out military conflict now. I happen to think that we must assess the evidence over the coming period. That is the right thing to do, and our road map sets out how we would do it.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): It is one thing to not rule out military action, but is not the problem with the Government’s motion that it asks for an in-principle vote for military action now, before we hear what the inspectors say and before the UN processes take place?

Edward Miliband: I say to my hon. Friend and the House that this morning, it was noticeable that the Government motion would be presented, if it was voted for—this is an important point—as the House endorsing the principle of military action. That is why I do not feel ready to support the Government motion, and why I believe the Opposition amendment, which sets out a framework for decision, is the right thing to vote for.

Penny Mordaunt: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Edward Miliband: I am going to make a bit more progress.

Angus Robertson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Edward Miliband: I will give way.

Angus Robertson: Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that in advance of previous conflicts, such as the intervention in Afghanistan, political parties in the House were briefed in detail, and on Privy Council terms, on the nature of the evidence on why there should be intervention? Can he confirm that there have been no such briefings in advance of this vote?

Edward Miliband: I have had the benefit of briefings with the Prime Minister, but I am sure that he, having heard the hon. Gentleman's intervention, will want to extend that facility to him and other minority parties.

Penny Mordaunt: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

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Edward Miliband: I will not give way.

As I was saying, by setting this framework today, we will give ourselves the time and space to assess the impact that any intervention will have on the Syrian people, and to assess the framework of international law and legitimacy. As I have said, I do not believe that we should be rushed to judgment on this question on a political timetable set elsewhere. In the coming days, the Government have a responsibility, building on what the Prime Minister did today—but it is also more than what he did today—to set out their case on why the benefits of intervention and action outweigh the benefits of not acting.

Penny Mordaunt: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Edward Miliband: No, I want to make this point.

I do not rule out supporting the Prime Minister, but I believe he must make a better case than he has made today on this question. Frankly, he cannot say to the House and to the country that the Government motion would not change our stance on Syria or our involvement in the Syrian conflict. It would, and the House needs to assess that.

Our amendment sets out a roadmap from evidence to decision that I believe can command the confidence of the House and the British public. Crucially, the amendment would place responsibility for the judgment on the achievement of the criteria for action—reporting by the weapons inspectors; compelling evidence; the vote in the Security Council; the legal base; and the prospect of successful action—with this House in a subsequent vote.

I hope the House can unite around our amendment, because I believe it captures a view shared on both sides of the House, both about our anger at the attack on innocent civilians, and about a coherent framework for making the decision on how we respond.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): May I thank my right hon. Friend and the shadow Foreign Secretary for the measured approach that they are taking on this very serious issue? Does my right hon. Friend agree that any reckless or irresponsible action could lead to full

war in that area? We must understand from previous conflicts that war is not some sort of hokey-cokey concept; once you're in, you're in.

Edward Miliband: That is why there must not be a rush to judgment—my hon. Friend is entirely right.

Penny Mordaunt: The right hon. Gentleman speaks of a road map. Does he not appreciate that the first stage in our response to the atrocities is what we do in the Chamber this afternoon? Given that his perfectly legitimate concerns about consequences, evidence and so on are met by the Government motion, may I urge him to support the motion so that we can send a united, strong message to Assad and others? Otherwise, we will undermine our national security.

Edward Miliband: We will not support a Government motion that was briefed this morning as setting out an in-principle decision to take military action. That would be the wrong thing to do, and on that basis we will

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oppose the motion. We could only support military action, and should only make the decision to do so, when and if the conditions of our amendment were met.

We all know that stability cannot be achieved by military means alone. The continued turmoil in the country and the region in recent months and years further demonstrates the need to ensure that we uphold the fate of innocent civilians, the national interest and the security and future prosperity of the whole region and the world. I know that the whole House recognises that this will not and cannot be achieved through a military solution.

Whatever our disagreements today, Labour Members stand ready to play our part in supporting measures to improve the prospects for peace in Syria and the middle east: it is what the people of Britain and the world have the right to expect. But this is a very grave decision, and it should be treated as such by this House, and it will be treated as such by this country.

The fundamental test will be this: as we think about the men, women and children who have been subjected to this atrocity and about the prospects for other citizens in Syria, can the international community act in a lawful and legitimate way that will help them and prevent further suffering? The seriousness of our deliberations should match the significance of the decision we face, which is why I urge the House to support our amendment.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: No fewer than 99 right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, meaning that necessarily large numbers of colleagues will be disappointed. As always, the Chair will do its best to accommodate the level of interest, but it will not be assisted by Members coming up to it to ask whether and, if so, when they will be called. I ask Members please not to do so: calmness and patience are required.

Dame Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister—or, at least, a spokesperson—told the media yesterday morning that a UN resolution was to be circulated in the afternoon. I believe that it was, but when I asked the Library for the text neither it nor the Foreign Office was available to provide it. Will you, Mr Speaker, look into that?

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Lady is an immensely experienced Member—she is now into her 26th year; she started extremely young—and she knows that that is not a matter for the Chair. She has candidly aired her concern, and the Prime Minister and other Members on the Treasury Bench will have heard what she had to say.

3.43 pm

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington) (Con): I listened in the most charitable manner I could to the Leader of the Opposition explaining why he cannot support the motion. Given that the Government responded not simply to his request but to those made by Members on the Government Benches to wait until the inspectors had completed their task and to enable the Security Council to consider the consequences, we and the country can only conclude that the right hon. Gentleman is incapable of taking yes for an answer.

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I want to use the short time available to me to concentrate on one set of words—a reasonable phrase—in his amendment: the need for “compelling evidence” of the Assad regime’s responsibility for the chemical attacks. We should be clear what “compelling evidence” means. Nothing could ever be proven 100%. Someone charged with murder before our courts can be convicted if the jury is satisfied beyond reasonable doubt. That does not require someone to say, “I saw him pull the trigger.” Sometimes—usually—that is not available.

When we look at the situation in regard to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, what we know for certain—it is not in dispute—is that chemical weapons were used. The Assad regime themselves admit that. We know that such weapons were used in the middle of a sustained artillery attack by the Syrian Government forces on the very suburb in Damascus where the chemical attacks then took place. We know that the Syrian Government are the only state in the middle east that has massive stocks of chemical weapons, and we know that there cannot have been any ethical objection on the part of the Assad regime to using chemical weapons, not just because they have probably used them before, but because any regime that slaughters 100,000 of its own citizens clearly would have no compunction in using chemical weapons as well.

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): When the right hon. and learned Gentleman says that we know that Syria is the only country in the middle east that possesses stocks of chemical weapons, will he draw attention to the use by Israel of illegal chemical weapons in Gaza—white phosphorus? Surely Israel, too, has such weapons, and we should take that into account in looking at the spectrum.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind: Let us use another occasion, if we may, to debate these important allegations. The issue is that the Syrian Government themselves do not deny that they have massive stocks of chemical weapons, and therefore the issue is whether there is any credible argument that on this particular occasion, in a district controlled by the opposition, the opposition somehow had both the capability and the will, and indeed did carry out this attack.

The inspectors’ reports will be helpful in two respects, I hope. First, they will give confirmation of the scale of this chemical attack. If only three or four people die, it could be argued that somebody could have been carrying around a bag of chemical agent and dispersed it, as happened in the Tokyo underground a good number of years ago. But when there are not just 300 people dying, but more than 3,000 people treated by Médecins Sans Frontières, clearly this was a massive chemical

weapons attack which required rockets and a capability which, as we have heard, no one else in Syria has now or is likely to have in the short to medium term. Against that background, the inspectors could provide us with some helpful additional information.

The question then becomes, what is the purpose if military action is taken? It is not only going to be limited, as the Prime Minister has rightly said, but it has one overwhelming purpose, which has to be to deter further acts of the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. Let me be emphatic about this—I hope

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no one would argue otherwise—that at this very moment, the Assad regime in Damascus are watching very carefully to see whether they will get away with what they have done. If they get away with it, if there is no international response of a significant kind, we can be absolutely certain that the forces within Damascus will be successful in saying, “We must continue to use these whenever there is a military rationale for doing so.” There is no guarantee that a military strike against military targets will work, but there is every certainty that if we do not make that effort to punish and deter, these actions will indeed continue.

The other point that must concentrate all our minds very comprehensively is that a failure to act is not in itself an absence of a decision. It has profound other consequences, not just the ones I have mentioned, and most profound for the United Nations itself. The League of Nations effectively collapsed in the 1930s when Germany and Italy effectively prevented any sanctions or other action being taken against Italy for the invasion of Abyssinia. That, together with other similar acts of aggression which the League could not handle because of the absence of unanimity, created a chaos which led to the second world war. So if we can take action that has the support of Arab states and of the bulk of the international community, far from suffering, the United Nations and the concept of international institutions and the international community acting to deal with such acts of aggression will be boosted in a way that would not happen through any other course of action.

I believe that what is being recommended and will come back to this House is not only overwhelmingly in the interests of innocent Syrian men, women and children, but is far more likely to boost the concept of international action to deal with gross atrocities and violations of human rights than simply wringing our hands, protesting at the action but failing to make any effective response to it.

3.49 pm

Mr Jack Straw (Blackburn) (Lab): I was the final speaker in the debate in this House on 18 March 2003 on the resolution in which I had recommended to the House that we should take military action against the Saddam Hussein regime. That resolution was passed by 412 votes to 149. I have set out in detail elsewhere how I came to the conclusion that war against Saddam Hussein was justified, on the basis of information that was then available and of widely shared international judgments about the threats posed by the regime. But, whatever the justification on 18 March 2003, the fact was that there was an egregious intelligence failure, and it has had profound consequences, not only across the middle east but in British politics, through the fraying of those bonds of trust between the electors and the elected that are so essential to a healthy democracy.

Iraq has not, however, meant that the British public or, still less, this House have become pacifist. Two years ago, the House and the public approved action against the Gaddafi regime. The need for that action to prevent a massacre in and around Benghazi was palpable. It was approved by the Security Council and it was plainly lawful. But Iraq has made the public much more questioning and more worried about whether we should put troops in harm's way, especially when intelligence is involved.

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The question before us now is whether the use of chemical weapons changes the considerations that, up to now, have determined that we should not intervene militarily in Syria. We need to decide whether, as the Government motion proposes, a “strong humanitarian response” to the use of chemical weapons may, if necessary, “require military action” by the United Kingdom’s armed forces. My conclusion at the moment is that the Government have yet to prove their case. I think we are clear that chemical weapons were used, but we will get more information on that from the inspectors. We are also pretty clear that culpability for that is likely to have been with the Assad regime, but I say to the Prime Minister and to my right hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench that there was also very strong evidence about what we all thought Saddam held—*[Interruption.]* No, he had held an arsenal of chemical and biological weapons, and the issue was much more one of what we should do about that than of a widespread sharing of the assessment by the Security Council that Saddam posed a threat to international peace and security.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman described Iraq as an intelligence failure, but what actually happened was that Tony Blair said in this House that the information was “extensive, detailed and authoritative”, yet it later turned out to be limited, sporadic and patchy. That was the assessment of the intelligence services. It was not an intelligence failure; it was a political failure.

Mr Straw: We can debate the Iraq inquiries at another date, and I am sure that we shall do so. I accept my responsibilities fully for what happened in respect of Iraq. I have sought, both before the Iraq inquiry and elsewhere, to explain why I came to my conclusion. I simply make the point, which is widely shared across the House, that one of the consequences of the intelligence failure on Iraq has been to raise the bar that we have to get over when the question of military action arises.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): The House was told that there were weapons of mass destruction that posed a threat to the United Kingdom, and we were also told, in 2006, that we were going into Helmand province in the hope that not a shot would be fired. Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge that the result of accepting those decisions has been the deaths of 623 of our brave soldiers? Does he not realise that those are the reasons that the public no longer trust Government assurances about going to war?

Mr Straw: With respect to my hon. Friend, the arguments about Afghanistan, then and now, are very different. There will be other occasions to debate that matter.

Even if there is compelling evidence on culpability, the bigger question arises of the strategic objective of any military action and its likely consequences. The Prime Minister has accepted that such strikes would not significantly degrade the chemical weapons capability of the Assad regime. We need to be clear about that. The right hon. and learned Member for Kensington (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) spoke about trying to take that capability down. However, if the first set of strikes failed

to do that—the Prime Minister seemed to accept that they

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would be more by way of punishment and deterrence, rather than a degrading of the capability—what would happen after that? We all know—I bear the scars of this—how easy it is to get into military action, but how difficult it is to get out of it.

There is also the issue of precisely what is the objective of the action. The case seems to veer between the alleviation of human suffering and some sort of warning for or punishment of the Assad regime. If the Prime Minister comes back to the House to recommend military action, he must be clear about precisely what the purposes are.

This morning, we woke up to hear the President of the United States, Barack Obama, saying that by acting in

“a clear and decisive but very limited way, we send a shot across”

Assad’s bow. Let us pause and consider the metaphor that was chosen by the President, because it is revealing. A shot across the bow is a warning that causes no damage and no casualties—shells fired over the bridge of a naval vessel. In this case, it might be a Tomahawk missile that is targeted to fly over Damascus and land in the unoccupied deserts beyond. That cannot be what the President has in mind. We need to know what he really has in mind and what the consequences of that will be. There will be casualties from any military action—some military and almost certainly many civilian.

I have one last point to put to the Prime Minister. He sought to draw a distinction in his speech between our response to war crimes and taking sides in the conflict. However much he struggles to make that distinction, let us be clear that if we take an active part in military action, which I do not rule out, we shall be taking sides. There is no escape from that. We shall be joining with the rebels, with all the consequences that arise from that, and not maintaining a position of neutrality.

3.57 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): There are a number of things on which the House will be generally agreed. The first is that, for whatever reason, there is widespread scepticism among the British public about any further military involvement overseas. A number of questions need to be answered before we become involved in any form of military action. The first is what a good outcome looks like, the second is whether such an outcome can be engineered, the third is whether we will be part of engineering such an outcome, and the fourth is how much of the eventual outcome we want to have ownership of.

I do not believe that we can answer any of those questions to our satisfaction with regard to the civil war in Syria. I believe that that is why the British public are deeply sceptical about our being involved in that civil war in any way, shape or form. I share that scepticism. I also believe that there is no national interest for the United Kingdom in taking a side in that civil war. To exchange an Iran-friendly and Hezbollah-friendly Assad regime for an anti-west, anti-Christian and anti-Israel al-Qaeda regime does not seem to offer us any advantage.

However, that is not the issue before us today. There is a separate issue on which we need to have

great clarity, which is how we respond to a regime that has used chemical weapons against its civilian population—something that is against international law and is a war

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crime. The pictures we have seen in recent days have shocked us, even in our desensitised age. The pictures of toddlers laid out in rows were, and should be, deeply disturbing to all of us. The question is whether we are willing to tolerate more such pictures and, if not, how we go about minimising the risk of such pictures coming to our screens in the future.

It is true that if we take action against the Assad regime we cannot guarantee that it will not do something, or similar things, again in the future, but I believe it will minimise the risk and show the people of Syria that we are on their side and that the rest of the world is serious about its obligations in enforcing the existing law about the use of chemical weapons.

Much of the debate has focused on the consequences of taking action, but we must also focus on the consequences of not taking action. Will it make the Syrian people more or less safe from the use of such weapons in the future? On the implications for the Syrian regime, will it make it feel that it is more or less secure in taking such actions again in the future? On regimes in other parts of the world that might decide to use chemical weapons against their domestic populations, what signal would we send them about the international community's willingness to stop such use in future if we do nothing? Let us also not forget the onlookers in this—Iran—who have their own nuclear intentions and are intent on testing the will of the international community.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I accept many of the points that the right hon. Gentleman is making, but many Opposition and, I think, Government Members would say that this is not a choice between action and inaction; it is simply a choice of what action should be taken. Some of us worry that military action might exacerbate the situation, rather than make it better, and draw us into mission creep, over which we would have very little control.

Dr Fox: I entirely understand the hon. Gentleman's point, which is valid. As the Prime Minister said, it is a judgment call. It is incumbent on those who take these decisions ultimately to determine whether they think it is more likely that we will be drawn into such a conflict or whether we will achieve the objectives without that happening. That is a matter for legitimate debate in the House. I believe that if we do not take action—and that probably means military action—the credibility of the international community will be greatly damaged. What value would red lines have in the future if we are unwilling to implement those that already exist?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Fox: I will give way once more, to my hon. Friend here.

Mary Macleod (Brentford and Isleworth) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. Does he agree that if we do nothing and stand by and watch as the horrific atrocities described by the Prime Minister take place, it will be as if we agree with these chemical weapons that have been spread across Syria?

Dr Fox: If we do nothing I believe it would be an abdication of our international legal and moral obligations, which we should take extremely seriously.

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Let me say briefly one other thing. The Government should be commended for taking the United Nations route. It is right and proper that we do so and that the appropriate amount of time is given to consideration, but that comes with a caveat. It is clear that Russia has military interests in the port of Tartus and that it still feels very sore about its belief that it was sold a pup over Libya. We are not likely to get Russian support in the Security Council, nor are we likely to get Chinese support there, either. We cannot allow a situation whereby the international community's ability to implement international law is thwarted by a constant veto by Russia and China. Therefore, I think we should be deeply grateful to the Attorney-General for the clarity of the advice that he has set out on how we can carry forward our international humanitarian obligations were such a situation to present itself.

Let us be very clear that to do nothing will be interpreted in Damascus as appeasement of a dreadful regime and the dreadful actions it has carried out. Appeasement has never worked to further the cause of peace in the past, and it will not now, and it will not in the future.

4.4 pm

Dame Tessa Jowell (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I rise to speak in favour of the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition.

I was a member of the Cabinet that decided in good faith that this country should join the invasion of Iraq, and I know how heavy the burden is on those who are charged with such a decision. I also agree that, in many cases, doing nothing is as much a decision as doing something and that the present catastrophe in Syria demands a decision of us. As has been said, the use of chemical weapons is prohibited by customary international law and binding conventions. Short of the use of nuclear weapons, it is the most heinous crime a country can commit, made even more dreadful when chemical weapons are used in civil war on its own people.

I am therefore unhesitatingly in favour of taking the step that will deal as effectively as we can with Assad. But what is that step? What is our locus? How can we be effective, and at what cost? I want to deal with the last question first. The cost in human suffering and human life is clear, but there is another long-term cost—the damage that we may do to the rule of international law in international affairs.

It is obviously deeply frustrating that Russia and China have formed a blocking minority in the Security Council, and I know that Members will want to reinforce the importance of diplomatic initiatives to seek to engage Russia, in particular, in negotiation with the Syrian Government. However, it is also clear that to go to war with Assad—that is what it would be—without the sanction of a UN Security Council resolution would set a terrible precedent. After the mission creep of the Libyan operation, it would amount to nothing less than a clear statement by the US and its allies that we were the arbiters of international right and wrong when we felt that right was on our side. What could we do or say if, at some point, the Russians or Chinese adopted a similar argument? What could we say if they attacked a country without a UN resolution because they claimed it was right and cited our action as a precedent?

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Legal rectitude may not amount to much, but it is all we have. It remains our best hope, and we cast it aside at terrible peril, hence the importance of the route map set out in the Opposition amendment.

I welcome the decision that the Government have now made to take no action until the UN inspectors have delivered their report, but if or when it is proved conclusively that Assad has used chemical weapons on his people, what can we do to prevent him from doing so again? There will perhaps be time in the future to bring him before the International Criminal Court, but in practical terms, what can we do, even if we are able to get a UN Security Council resolution?

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw) mentioned, the US chairman of the joint chiefs of staff wrote to the Senate armed services committee last month—we are all grateful for the excellent briefing by the Library—about having examined five options. He said that controlling chemical weapons would involve billions of dollars each month and involve risks that

“not all chemical weapons would be controlled, extremists could gain better access to remaining weapons, similar risks to no-fly zone but with the added risk to...troops on the ground.”

The situation is parlous, and—

Mr Speaker: Order.

4.9 pm

Sir Menzies Campbell (North East Fife) (LD): It is no secret that, notwithstanding the horrors of Damascus, I have reservations about the use of military action in the circumstances with which we are engaged. In particular, I have reservations relating to the absence of a proper role for the United Nations. However, as the Government motion now sets out, there is a role for the inspectors, there is a duty imposed on the Secretary-General, and there is an endorsement to use every effort to secure a United Nations Security Council resolution under chapter VII of its charter. In addition, and I will come back to this in a moment, the motion also provides that for all of us—supporters, sceptics or opponents—there will be an opportunity to pass judgment on any question of British involvement at a further stage when, not surprisingly perhaps, rather more information may be available.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that for some of us at least, tonight's vote will not predetermine that we are satisfied at the next stage that there is a coherent plan that does not inflict too much damage on neighbouring countries?

Sir Menzies Campbell: I think my right hon. Friend is referring, by way of inference, to the suggestion that there has been briefing that those who voted for the Government motion would be endorsing in principle military action. Most of us have been around here long enough to know how often briefing is a long way from the truth. Anyone who is in any doubt about that should read the precise terms of the Government's motion.

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The effort to achieve a resolution under chapter VII is a vital component of the doctrine of the responsibility to protect, because if no such resolution is achieved—here, I agree with the Attorney-General—we turn to what was once called humanitarian intervention and now is called responsibility to protect. It is a fundamental of that doctrine that every possible political and diplomatic alternative will have been explored and found not to be capable.

I want to applaud, if I may, Mr Speaker, the House for taking the unusual step—in my view wholly justified—of publishing the Attorney-General’s advice. Those of us with long memories will remember that 10 years ago we were not favoured with anything like as much detail. It is also worth pointing out that there was no second vote 10 years ago. Within 24 hours of the motion being passed by the House endorsing the Labour Government’s proposals, the Tomahawk cruise missiles began to rain down on Baghdad.

It respectfully seems to me that we need to examine the matter not in response to the emotion that it undoubtedly engenders in all of us. Emotion is no substitution for judgment in matters of this kind. We must look beyond what might be achieved in the short term, to the medium term and the long term.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. and learned Gentleman spoke a moment ago of the responsibility to protect. One of the criteria is the prospects of success. Is he satisfied with the objectives of this action and the prospects of success on those objectives?

Sir Menzies Campbell: We cannot arrive at a conclusion on the prospects of success until we have more information than is currently available. The hon. Gentleman is right. I should have mentioned that the prospect of success is a part of that evolving doctrine. We should also remember that the doctrine is not universally accepted, and that the mere use of it is, on occasion, regarded as highly controversial. I rather fancy that at the G20 summit in St Petersburg next week the doctrine of the responsibility to protect may not get considerable support.

My questions, which I do not expect to be answered but I hope will lie on the table, are these. Will military action bring the Geneva conference any closer? Is it more likely to produce the political settlement that everyone believes is necessary? Although a strategic objective is set out, I hope I might be forgiven for thinking that military action is more of a tactic than a strategic imperative. That is why we must give consideration to the endgame, to use a colloquialism, and in particular to the whole issue of regional stability—what the consequences might be in an already very unstable region.

What would happen were the next horror to be carried out by some conventional means? What would our response be in the light of the fact that, for two years or so, a number of horrors have been brought about by the use of conventional weapons? My concern is that if we open the gate once, it will be difficult to close it.

I have read the motion and Opposition amendment and I believe that both are motivated by the same determination to do what is right and to see that the House endorses everything that is right. However, I

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have to confess that, even following the most narrow textual analysis, I can find no difference of substance or principle anywhere in the two offerings. That is why I shall support the Government in the Lobby this evening. I very much hope that the Opposition will, too.

4.16 pm

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Across the House, in all political parties, there is total

revulsion at what has been happening in Syria in the past months and years of the brutal conflict there—in particular following the recent apparent chemical weapons attacks on civilians. There is absolute unanimity, here and internationally, that the use of those indiscriminate weapons is unacceptable and the United Nations is right to be investigating the circumstances of the attacks.

If we are serious about our support for the United Nations, the inspectors must be able to complete their work and report back to the world community before any course of new action is undertaken. If, as we expect, it is confirmed that chemical weapons were used, one of the first things that should be made clear is that whoever ordered and carried out those attacks will, in time, face the full force of the law. Regardless of what may otherwise happen in the short term, the perpetrators of such a crime should understand that they face indictment by the International Criminal Court or by a specially convened war crimes tribunal.

Today, however, we have been recalled to Parliament because of potential imminent military action by UK and other forces. We have been called back four days before Parliament was to reconvene anyway, so it is not unreasonable to conclude that there was a high probability that intervention would take place before Monday. The UK Government expected that we should vote for a blank cheque that would have allowed UK military action before UN weapons inspectors concluded their investigations and before their detailed evidence was provided to the United Nations—or, indeed, Members of this House. Following our having been misled on the reasons for war in Iraq, the least the UK Government could have done was to provide detailed evidence. Frankly, they have not, as was underlined in my intervention on the Prime Minister earlier.

In contrast with the sensible approach taken in the run-up to the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan, today we were expected to give the UK Government a blank cheque. However, Members on both sides clearly reminded their leaders that this is a hung Parliament and that there would not be a majority for a blank cheque. Instead there should at least be safeguards.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the public are suspicious about the argument that the issue is not about regime change? Only a few weeks ago, the Government wanted to arm the rebels. That argument is causing utter confusion among everybody.

Angus Robertson: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point that will be noticed outside the House.

I appeal to Government Members to look closely at the amendment and ask themselves what is wrong with the safeguard it proposes. Surely the UN weapons inspectors must be able to conclude their mission and have the

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necessary opportunity to report to the Security Council on the evidence and their findings on whether chemical weapons were used in Syria. Surely we must have definitive evidence that the Syrian regime or opposition was responsible for the use of these weapons—with the greatest respect, that means not just two pages of A4 paper. Surely the UN Security Council must consider and vote on this matter in the light of the reports of the weapons inspectors and the evidence submitted. Surely there must be a clear legal basis in international law for taking collective military action to protect the Syrian people on humanitarian grounds. And surely the aims, objectives and consequences of any intervention must be made clear and must not run the risk of

escalating the conflict, causing further deaths and worsening the humanitarian situation. The safeguards in the amendment are absolutely clear and will bring the issue back for a parliamentary vote before any UK military intervention is possible. Should these safeguards not be satisfied, the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru will vote against intervention, just as we voted consistently against the Iraq war.

I urge the UK Government to invest more time and effort in supporting an end to the conflict and stepping up humanitarian support for the hundreds of thousands of victims in Syria and refugees who have fled to neighbouring countries. Earlier today, I met Jehangir Malik of Islamic Relief, an organisation that deserves as much assistance as possible to help people in and around Syria. He warned about the potential negative impact of military intervention and why that could significantly worsen the humanitarian situation. May I urge the Government to do yet more to support Islamic Relief and the other organisations involved in the Disasters Emergency Committee? With so many people watching our deliberations, I also urge the public to continue their great generosity in supporting humanitarian efforts.

I also urge the Government to renew their efforts to find a diplomatic resolution to the conflict. Do we think that Tomahawk cruise missiles fired into Syria will make that easier or more difficult? It is clearly understood that this civil war is intractable and that there is little willingness to compromise. Earlier today, I heard an appeal by Sakhr al-Makhadhi, the London-based Syria expert and commentator. He said that the people of Syria, from all backgrounds, are crying out for help to resolve the civil war. Please can the UK Government focus their attention on working with the United States and the Russian Federation, and all others who have influence in the region, including Iran, to bring the different Syrian sides to the negotiating table?

In conclusion, the UK Government must not have a blank cheque for military intervention in Syria. We have already heard that it is being briefed that tonight's vote on their motion is an agreement, in principle, for military action. We should not give them a blank cheque for military intervention in Syria, either in principle or in practice.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD) *rose*—

Angus Robertson: I have only 30 seconds left.

We cannot ignore the lessons of the calamitous Iraq war. We need safeguards, in order to ensure that all is done to provide evidence about chemical weapons and to support the United Nations and international law.

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We need a coherent and comprehensive strategy that fully takes into account the consequences of intervention. What is currently a calamity for the people of Syria could worsen and become a conflagration across the middle east. That is why this House should unite around the cross-party safeguards amendment, vote against the Government motion, and make diplomatic and humanitarian efforts the key focus of the international community.

4.22 pm

Richard Ottaway (Croydon South) (Con): There are four key questions we have to address. Is there a moral case? Does the intelligence stack up? Is this lawful? What is the objective? The

moral case is something each individual MP will have to decide, based on his own character, morality and attitude to world affairs. Many colleagues and friends are, in principle, non-interventionists, whereas others have a strong interventionist streak. Others say, "If that criterion is met, or this, maybe." We all wrestle with the conflict between head and heart. Some say that the murder of hundreds of innocent citizens by chemical weapons is nothing to do with us and that it is easier not to get involved, but I ask them to examine their conscience.

Syria is a signatory to the Geneva protocol of 1925 prohibiting the use of chemical weapons. It was a protocol drawn up in the aftermath of the first world war, when the world said, "Never again." Do we now say, "Well, never mind, let's just sit on our hands and ignore the atrocities taking place"? This is not just any ordinary convention; it is a convention on genocide and the abuse of basic morality. Some say, "What's the difference between being killed by an artillery shell or by sarin gas?" With everything in life there is a red line—a straw that breaks the camel's back—and, to me, this is it. In my judgment, faced with the mass murder of innocent civilians, doing nothing is not an option.

In his excellent speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) made the point about credibility. Britain is a leading member of NATO, it is chair of the G8 and it has a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. This gives us huge diplomatic clout, but with the benefits come responsibilities, and this is just the moment when we must ask ourselves what those responsibilities are. We can behave like a minor nation with no real international responsibilities and put our head in the sand, or we can live up to the expectations that the world community has of us.

Our objectives must be strategic. A missile strike would make it clear that chemical weapons cannot be used without a response from the world community; it would help to degrade the Assad regime's future capacity; and it would deter the regime from its future use. In my judgment, those are worthy objectives that have my support.

Mr Michael McCann (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Lab): One component common to both the motion and the Opposition's amendment is the possibility of our ending up on a path to military action, a missile strike being the first of potentially two steps towards such action. The Prime Minister did not answer the question from my right hon. Friend the

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Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw) about what that action would entail, although he ruled out the possibility of a large-scale deployment of troops on the ground. In order to degrade Assad's opportunity to use chemical weapons, would we not have to use either special forces on the ground or launch a missile strike, which could cause even more damage?

Richard Ottaway: We have to take the world as we find it. The situation has been made quite clear, including by the Prime Minister: the aim initially is to attempt to degrade Assad's capacity, so it is essential that our strategic objective be focused on the command and control of the chemical weapons programme. If that is not successful, I am sure that he and I will be back here asking, "Where do we go from here?"

I turn to the Attorney-General's view that there is a legal basis for intervention without a Security Council resolution, which poses more questions than it answers.

Mr Straw: Will the hon. Gentleman be a bit more precise? Today, the Prime Minister widened the objectives to include degrading the chemical weapons capability, but General Dempsey has made it clear that that is possible to a significant degree only with the deployment of thousands of troops and hundreds of ships. Surely we have to be clear about what we anticipate will result from the use of Tomahawk missiles and such things before, not after, we embark on their use.

Richard Ottaway: The right hon. Gentleman put that point to the Prime Minister, and I thought he dealt with it. General Dempsey was talking about the wider picture, whereas the motion and the proposal concern the chemical weapons regime, which we will attempt to degrade.

Dame Joan Ruddock: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Ottaway: I am sorry, but I have used up my two interventions.

The Attorney-General's view is that there is a legal basis for intervention without a Security Council resolution, which I believe poses more questions than answers. Since the present doctrine was introduced in 2005, there has been no precedent for such a thing, and in my view it has serious consequences. In effect, it means that the UN is now redundant and that the humanitarian doctrine has legs of its own and can be interpreted virtually any way the parties wish. When the dust has settled on this affair, I hope that the House and the United Nations will revisit the responsibility to protect, because at present it is not working as it was intended.

On the intelligence, those of us who were here in 2003, at the time of the Iraq war, felt they had their fingers burnt. The case for war was made and Parliament was briefed on the intelligence, but we were given only part of the story and, in some cases, an inaccurate story. A summary of the intelligence has been published, but it is the bare bones, and I urge the Government in the following days to consider how more intelligence can be provided. The picture is clear, as far as it goes, but it has no depth. I warmed to the suggestion from my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) that the Intelligence and Security Committee could

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look at the JIC analysis, report to the House on the veracity of the intelligence and confirm that it agrees with the opinion in the JIC intelligence letter before us.

This is a difficult time. There are no easy options. We are between a rock and a hard place, but we have to decide, and I, for one, will be in the Government Lobby tonight.

4.29 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I want to thank the Conservative Back Benchers, a number of Liberal Democrat Members, the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Foreign Secretary for their intervention over the last 48 hours, which halted what looked like a headlong rush to war. It is widely acknowledged that the American President has set a timetable, most probably for an attack this weekend. He came under pressure last year from the Republicans and McCain to set red lines as parameters. It was inevitable that that would escalate the demand for military action at a later date. That might explain the American position, but it does not explain why a sovereign independent state called Great Britain should automatically fall into line in support of military action. If there is a lesson of the past 48 hours, it is that no Prime Minister and no Government should take this House or the British people for granted on matters of this nature.

The reality is that, yes, time has moved on since Iraq. People have made references to lessons from Iraq, and I want to refer to three. First, there is no automatic approval of, or even trust in, a prime ministerial judgment on an issue such as this involving the country in military action without overwhelming justification, evidence and thorough debate. The evidence before us from the JIC today says that there is “some evidence” to suggest regime culpability in the gas attack and that it is “highly likely” that the Syrian regime is responsible. I have to say that “highly likely” and “some evidence” are not good enough to risk further lives, to risk counter attack, to inflame the whole region, to risk dragging other states into this war and, at the same time, to increase the risk of terrorism on British streets.

The second lesson of Iraq is based upon the principles of humanitarian intervention. It must be objectively clear that there is no practical alternative to the use of force if lives are to be saved. I do not believe that it has been demonstrated that all practical alternatives have been exhausted. In particular, discussions around the permanent stationing of UN weapons inspectors in Syria to prevent the use of these weapons have not been exhausted. That, linked to an insistence on the participation of all sides in a UN peace conference, has not been exhausted.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend not surprised that the British Government appear to have made no rational efforts to try to build a relationship with the new Government of Iran, which might be part of a road towards some kind of peace settlement?

John McDonnell: That leads to my third lesson from Iraq, and from Afghanistan. It is to ensure that any intervention does not cost lives and does not make matters worse; it is the “do no harm” principle. No matter how surgical the strike that is planned by the

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Americans or by us, lives will be lost and lives will be put at risk. A negotiated peace is the only long-term solution for Syria; that is what has been expressed by members of all parties in the House. Military intervention is more likely to undermine the potential for peace talks. Hawks within the Assad regime will be even more intransigent and defiant. The opposition—the so-called rebels—will have no incentive, because they will believe that the US and, yes, the UK and others will be on their side and that they can achieve a military victory. Military intervention would also alienate Iran and the Russians—the very people we look to now to bring Assad to the negotiating table.

If we have learned anything from Iraq and Afghanistan, it is this: military intervention does not just cost lives; it undermines the credibility of the international institutions that we look to to secure peace in the world and, in the long run, it undermines peace settlements across the globe. Therefore, I believe that we should focus on conflict prevention and conflict resolution and not support military aggression. That is why I will not support any motion that, in principle, supports military intervention in Syria, which can only do more harm than good.

4.34 pm

Mr James Arbuthnot (North East Hampshire) (Con): In common, I suspect, with all Members, I find this an exceptionally difficult issue. My constituents hate the idea of our getting involved in Syria, and so do I. As I said earlier, I have not yet made up my mind which way to vote, but the Prime Minister’s flexibility over the past couple of days has been extremely helpful.

I should like to look first at the legality of our taking action. The conversations that have been had with the media over the past few days have talked about Syria not having impunity for the use of chemical weapons. The word “impunity” implies that there is a new doctrine of punishment as a reason for going to war—not deterrence, not self-defence, not protection, but punishment. I believe that, if that is a new doctrine, it needs considerably wider international consensus than currently exists.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making an important point. The very last sentence of the Attorney-General’s advice says:

“Such an intervention would be directed exclusively to averting a humanitarian catastrophe, and the minimum judged necessary for that purpose.”

So there can be no new doctrine.

Mr Arbuthnot: I want to come to the Attorney-General’s advice. My right hon. and learned Friend is an exceptional lawyer, and therefore I have the temerity to question one aspect of what he says. The third of his conditions to be met for humanitarian action is that

“the proposed use of force must be necessary and proportionate to the aim of relief of humanitarian need”.

I believe that he needed to spell out an additional point that there must be a reasonable chance of success. Therefore, the legality of this action, in my view, depends entirely on the precise action proposed, and that we do

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not yet know. That is why the Prime Minister is absolutely right to say that we need to have a further vote in the House once it is clearer what action is proposed.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Is the right hon. Gentleman’s concern about a possible new doctrine of war as punishment informed by the fact that senior American political sources only last weekend talked in terms of retribution as the basis for taking action against Syria, and that was repeated by a Minister here as well? If the international community takes action on Syria on the basis of retribution as the defining motive, does that not send a very dangerous message and set a dubious standard for the wider middle east?

Mr Arbuthnot: Well, possibly, although there is a question, if there is a new doctrine, about how far it extends. Why was it not used with Mugabe? Why was it not used with Pol Pot earlier? That is why I question the Attorney-General’s advice, with temerity and diffidence, as I say.

What are the objectives of any military strike? My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said that the objective was to deter and degrade future chemical weapons use. As I understand it, a country that can make a non-stick frying pan can make chemical weapons. Personally, I have found it very difficult to find any country that can make a non-stick frying pan. Nevertheless, if Syria could simply recreate any weapons that we destroy, where would we have got by attacking the chemical weapons? What is the risk of collateral damage? What is the risk of hitting the chemical weapons that we are trying to prevent from being deployed? We need further information on that.

Next is the evidence. I am certainly in a minority in this country and probably in a minority in the

House in saying that I personally believed Tony Blair when he said that he believed that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. I am certainly in a minority in the country when I say that I still believe that he was telling the truth as he believed it to be, but I think that he exaggerated the influence of—*[Interruption.]* I know, I am naive and a silly young thing, but I still believe that he exaggerated the influence and importance of intelligence. I do not think that we have yet got to the bottom of the precise limitations of what intelligence can tell us.

Paul Flynn: During my time in this House, chemical weapons have been used against the Kurds; they were used in the Iran-Iraq war; and they were used against the people in Gaza, in the form of phosphorous bombs—certainly a chemical bomb. Is not the real reason we are here today not the horror at these weapons—if that horror exists—but as a result of the American President having foolishly drawn a red line, so that he is now in the position of either having to attack or face humiliation? Is that not why we are being drawn into war?

Mr Arbuthnot: No, I do not think so. I think the real reason is that unless we do something—it must not be something stupid—Assad will use more chemical weapons time and again. I believe that in order to stop the use of chemical weapons from becoming the norm, the world needs to act. The world, however, does not equal the

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United Kingdom. If the world wants us to act as the international policeman, let the world say so, because when we have done so in the past, the world has not tended to thank us.

It could be argued that it is only us who have the capability to act, but there is a paradox here. We are a country with the fourth largest defence budget in the world, yet attacks could still be made on this country using weapons against which we have no defence. Actually, that is true of every country in the world. We should take that concern into account when we decide how to vote. I believe that it would probably be helpful to support the Government tonight, but next week—or whenever the decision comes up—we will need to take that issue very clearly into account.

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