

WHY BRITAIN NEEDS A NEW FOREIGN POLICY & STILL NEEDS A STOP THE WAR MOVEMENT – Frank Stone May 2018

IRAQ

In 2003 the Stop the War Coalition was instrumental in organising the largest demonstration in British history, when up to 2million people marched through London, as part of world protests against the upcoming Iraq war. It came within a whisker of stopping British involvement in the second Iraq war.

On February 15th, 2003, up to 30 million people, many of whom had never demonstrated before in their lives, came out in nearly 800 cities around the world to protest against the impending Iraq War. The New York Times called this movement the “Second Superpower”.

A bold documentary by Amir Amirani charts the birth and growth of the new people power movement, now sweeping the world, taking us up to the Arab Spring and Syria, a little over 10 years after that historic day.

In his book “The march that shook Blair” Ian Sinclair records and shows the importance of this march. Salma Yakoub, former leader of the Respect Party, mentions “ the important role played by British Muslims”.

Blair thought that he would have to resign and many lives would have been saved had he done so

The excuse for going to war was that Saddam Hussein possessed “weapons of mass destruction” which were never found, though Blair looked under every grain of sand. People learned not to trust politicians, particularly those lying their way to war.

For a time, the bar for going to war seemed to be raised. Prime Minister Cameron failed to obtain a parliamentary majority for bombing Syria. On the most recent occasion May avoided any problem with parliamentary democracy by refusing any prior discussion even though parliament was due to meet the following day. So much for British democracy.

Now we are in a new century and many young people will not have lived in a year without war. The Middle East is in a state of turmoil. The wars in Iran and Afghanistan have not finished, Yemen is being devastated and assaults on Palestinians escalate. Syria is being fought over by two nuclear armed states.

Politically there has been some change in the landscape. Labour is now led by an anti-war campaigner to the horror of the political establishment. However although he has won two major campaigns to become leader and undoubtedly his anti- imperialist policies won him much of that support, the parliamentary Labour Party still has old Blairites, Zionists and military interventionists among its ranks. This means that action outside parliament is necessary to raise support for anti-war policies.

REFUGEES: they are here because we were there.

One outcome of foreign military intervention is the large increase in the number of migrants. Politicians tell us that Britain has a proud record of accepting and welcoming refugees, while simultaneously saying we must cut the numbers.

Timothy Gee, a Quaker, who did some research, after visiting the Calais “Jungle” refugee camp enquired what people there thought of British politicians comments, to be told repeatedly “ you know Britain came uninvited to our countries and created many problems we experience now.”

Refugees mainly come from war torn areas, currently Syria but also from Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Areas where Britain, the US and other western governments have been involved in occupying and bombing these countries. What we can say is that these interventions have always made matters worse, and created a huge refugee problem. And guess what? – The nations that caused the problem are among the worst at helping the victims of their wars!

The following countries which have all been occupied or invaded by Britain in the past are the same countries from which people are fleeing at the present time

Palestine, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, Iraq and Syria.

The list continues: Bangladesh, Egypt, Ghana, India, Iran, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe. All of them countries from which thousands of people have fled, all of which have been occupied or ruled by Britain or British interests within living memory.

Taken together, they account for well over half of the world's refugees. Include Syria – being attacked by British forces right now for the third time in a century, and it's more than three quarters.

Currently there are 65.6 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide.

Of these 22.5 million were refugees at end of 2016 and 40.3 million internally displaced people. Of the refugees 17.2 million under UNHCR's mandate and 5.3 million Palestinian refugees registered by UNRWA.

Children below 18 years of age constituted about half of the refugee population in 2016, as in recent years.

We can only wonder what sort of lives migrants must have been living previously for them to undertake a hazardous journey and sleep in the cold, wet and inhumane conditions like the Jungle. The people in the camps haven't endured long dangerous journeys in ramshackle boats or collapsible dinghies because they want free NHS treatment, housing or benefits, as some would have us believe, but because they are desperate and are fleeing for their lives.

"But why are they all coming to the UK?" people ask.

The answer of course is they are not. The 3000 refugees in Calais represent only 0.015% of the global refugee population; the vast majority (around 86%) are taken in by neighbouring countries. Syrian refugees predominantly go to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq, for example.

Amongst the European countries, the UK houses amongst the lowest numbers. In 2014 Britain accepted 10,050 refugees; Germany accepted over four times as many. Sweden, despite having a population seven times smaller than ours, received nearly three times as many asylum applications.

By and large, the refugees coming to the UK are from countries that at some point have been affected either historically, through our colonial past, or more recently, with our military aggression.

THE ARMS TRADE

Britain's arms trade has attracted more newspaper coverage of late. The government's line when questioned is that it has one of the most rigorous arms control regimes in the world.

In 2014 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office issued a report that listed 28 countries that gave 'cause for concern' for their human rights abuses. But, according to Campaign Against the Arms Trade, the British government has granted export licenses to 18 of these countries, including Saudi Arabia, Israel, Libya, Iraq and the democratic Republic of Congo. So much for rigorous!

YEMEN – The worst humanitarian crisis in the World?

Britain's involvement in the greater Middle East in such countries as Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Libya is well documented, but it also plays a huge part in other conflict areas. Such a country is Yemen.

The Saudi-led air strikes on Yemen have caused many to question the role Britain is playing in continuing to sell arms to Saudi when it is conducting air-strikes on Yemen. A UN report in September has shown that over 1,100 children have been killed in the 3-year long war in Yemen, the vast majority of them by Saudi air strikes.

This report also describes the Yemen as the 'worst humanitarian crisis in the world'. Over half a million are suffering from cholera, around 19 million need humanitarian aid while 7 million are at risk of famine.

As well as the supply of arms, Britain has provided political, technical and logistical support for the Saudi-led bombing campaign. Around £3.8 billion worth of UK arms have been sold to Saudi since the start of the war.

TRIDENT

Trident is Britain's nuclear weapon. It consists of 4 nuclear-armed submarines based in Faslane, Scotland, with at least one at sea continuously.

It is a weapon that has never been used and, if it ever were, would likely unleash a nuclear war in which there would be no winners.

There have been disturbing reports on the safety of these weapons, which reveal a long history of fires, groundings, collisions and concealments, which indicate the mega-hazard posed by the Trident submarines.

The cost of running Trident and replacing it is hugely expensive with estimates of over £205 billion. In an age of austerity, we can all think of positive ways in which it could be better spent and the workforce diverted to useful employment.

May says Labour needs a money tree for all its proposals. Cancelling a hugely expensive Trident renewal would go a long way towards providing this tree!

Incidentally Government can always find more money for foreign interventions or in May's case for DUP Irish MPs to keep her government in power. The DUP is the Democratic Unionist Party founded by the late Ian Paisley.

FOREIGN INTERVENTION HAS FAILED

Western intervention has failed. Recent interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria have been disastrous, leading to the deaths of over a million people, the displacement of millions more, and increased violence at home and abroad.

The wars pursued by our governments have been opposed by the majority of the population who want to see a change in foreign policy. Our main opposition to these wars has been targeted at our own government, but, for the avoidance of doubt, Stop the War Coalition opposes all foreign intervention and that has included Russian intervention from the outset.

The so-called special relationship has helped to tie Britain to a failed and damaging foreign policy.

Britain needs a new, independent, foreign policy based on co-operation and diplomacy. That such a policy would end the waste of billions of pounds that would be better spent on welfare, education and the NHS.

The arms sales and political support for despotic and aggressive regimes like Saudi Arabia must stop.

The anti-war movement has played an important role in creating anti-war opinion in this country and strengthening the movement is essential to achieving a change in foreign policy.

WHAT WOULD A NEW FOREIGN POLICY LOOK LIKE?

As can be seen from the narrative above, much needs to be changed if Britain is to have an anti-war foreign policy. The following would be a good start.

- Stop bombing Iraq and Syria
- End arms sales, especially to Saudi and Israel
- End political and military support for Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen
- Help refugees, particularly those from Syria and Libya. At present those countries causing most displacements by their military actions are the ones taking the fewest refugees.
- Support a peace process in Syria without preconditions.
- Cancel Trident renewal and use the money saved to fund the NHS. Education and affordable housing.

TRUMP VISIT?

Finally a reference to the US President.

A major contribution to a more dangerous world has been the election on a minority vote (Hillary Clinton won 4 million more votes) of Donald Trump. His on/off visit to Britain is now scheduled for Friday 13th July.

Since taking office he

- has caused a frightening stand-off with nuclear armed North Korea
- has bombed Syria already the most bombed place on earth and a dangerous place because of the involvement of Russia also a nuclear armed state.
- has tweeted that the US "must greatly expand its nuclear capability" – after all it only has 7,300 nuclear warheads!
- has introduced a ban on Muslims from seven named countries from travelling to the US.
- is building a wall to keep migrants out

His first overseas visit was to Saudi Arabia, one of the most repressive and dictatorial regimes in the world where a healthy number of monthly public executions are a core element of the justice system.

Theresa May has played a uniquely bad role in supporting Trump. First, by rushing off, with unseemly haste, to be the first European leader to meet him and to offer him a state visit, complete with all the trimmings, to impress him.

This visit has so far not taken place due to the expected opposition.

Then allowing herself to be pictured holding hands with a man regarded as odious by millions of women. Worst of all she refused to condemn the ban on Muslims

Do we need a special relationship with this man?

Britain should not get involved in Trump's war mongering

Frank Stone

Convenor, Norwich Stop the War Coalition