



What Sir Keir Starmer's Victory Could Mean for Labour's Priorities on National Security

Liam Walpole

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On the 4 April, Sir Keir Starmer was elected leader of the Labour Party. However, with the media's attention squarely on the Government's approach to dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, one journalist flippantly commented that Sir Keir was "becoming leader when nobody cares". While there may be a hint of truth in that comment, Sir Keir's rise to the top of his party comes at a defining moment for the UK's post-Brexit foreign and security policy.

This article aims to cast a light on how Labour's new team will look to shape that debate. To do that, it will look at his new top team as well as the pledges Sir Keir made during his campaign. But first, it will examine the values and ideals that may drive Sir Keir Starmer's approach to foreign and security issues.

Who is Sir Keir Starmer?

Jeremy Corbyn became the leader of Labour in 2015 having already gained a reputation as an outspoken critic of British foreign policy and military interventions, over a parliamentary career spanning more than three decades. It was a record that led some to describe him as the "Left's Foreign Secretary" even before his aspirations to become prime minister.^[1] Such a characterisation does not seem to fit with Sir Keir's professional background.

Before his election to Parliament in 2015, he made his name as a successful lawyer. Between 2008 and 2013 he served as Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) and was awarded a knighthood in 2014. As a result, Sir Keir is the first Leader of the Opposition to hold a knighthood since 1964 and the first ever in Labour's history in Opposition.

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This successful legal career has led many to paint him as just “another metropolitan ‘London elite’”. But his upbringing and political ideals, as well as his career as a human rights lawyer, provide some essential context to understanding how he may approach national security matters.

Sir Keir was born into a modest family; his father was a toolmaker and his mother a nurse. As a teenager, Sir Keir was associated with the more radical, left-wing of his party, demonstrated by his membership of the East Surrey Young Socialists. In his twenties, he joined the editorial team for the left-wing fringe magazine, *Socialist Alternatives*, where he expressed his desire to see Labour become “the united party of the oppressed”.

Sir Keir tried to market these credentials during his recent campaign to appeal to the left of the party.^[2] He went to great lengths, for example, to show how during his career as a defence lawyer specialising in human rights he had supported working-class people to challenge unscrupulous bosses.^[3] Given that his knighthood was awarded (among other things) for his efforts to abolish the death penalty in several Caribbean countries, Sir Keir's record appears to stand up to scrutiny.

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"Sorry, Mr Blair, but 1441 does not authorise force"

- Keir Starmer, *The Guardian*, 17 March 2003

It is this impressive CV that has led many Conservative MPs to regard him “as a cut above the rest”. It also speaks to what some have described as Sir Keir’s more “assiduous, legalistic style”, characteristics which will likely see him deploy his “legalistic scalpel” and “professional” approach to challenge government policy on national security issues in a way that Corbyn could not. As one Labour ally put it: “He will get Johnson on detail.”[4]

Boris Johnson will not, however, be the first prime minister to face Sir Keir’s legalistic know-how. During his time as Shadow Brexit Secretary, Theresa May was regularly on the receiving end of his legal manoeuvring on Brexit. And you would be wrong to think this has been utilised only against his political opponents. Sir Keir gave just as good to a fellow legal practitioner turned MP, Tony Blair, in an opinion piece for *The Guardian Newspaper* in March 2003 in which he challenged the Labour Government’s legal positioning on the Iraq War, writing: “Sorry, Mr Blair, but 1441 does not authorise force”. This was a reference to the 2002 UN Security Council Resolution that the US and UK were attempting to use as a mandate for the 2003 military intervention in Iraq.

What this tells us about Sir Keir is that he will take a professional approach to scrutinising government policy on national security but that this will be driven by a clear set of values and beliefs drawn from a long legal career. The appointment of his new Shadow Frontbench also shows that he is on his way to fulfilling his youthful ambition of uniting the party.

Unity is strength, division is weakness

All four of the frontrunners in the recent leadership campaign have been appointed by the new Labour leader to join his Shadow Cabinet, a move that prevents them from posing a threat from the backbenches but also gives credence to Sir Keir's push to unify the party. Two of the most important roles from our perspective as analysts on UK defence and security policy are Lisa Nandy, who replaces Emily Thornberry as Shadow Foreign Secretary, and John Healey, who moves from the housing portfolio to shadowing Ben Wallace as Shadow Defence Secretary.

Nandy's Foreign Policy Priorities

Nandy's speeches on foreign policy issues were well-received during the leadership campaign, having been given a platform at Chatham House and the Royal Society of Arts. But few had predicted she would be appointed to cover the foreign policy brief, not least herself.[5]



Like many MPs in the post-Corbyn Labour Party, Nandy opposed the 2003 Iraq intervention. However, she does not oppose all forms of intervention and has criticised those who have sought to use the failure of Iraq to justify opposition to all, and any, intervention. “[W]e do the world a disservice if we don’t recognise that there are times when you stand up and times when you don’t”, she said.

She was also a fierce critic of deputy leadership candidates’ proposals to involve the party membership in decisions over the use of force,

an approach, she argued, that could undermine a government's ability to "safeguard people's lives". In a statement that revealed her support for humanitarian intervention she said: there were "instances intervention, whether it's military, whether it's diplomatic, whether it's aid-related, mattered."

But these quotes should not be taken out of context: Nandy is not an interventionist. Yes, she voted in favour of the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya and UK airstrikes against IS in Iraq in 2014, but she also voted against extending the campaign into Syria, claiming: "I am not convinced the plan the Prime Minister has put forward thus far will make us safer or reduce the threat of [IS]".^[6] Given her track record, she is likely to withhold her support for UK service personnel being deployed overseas unless there is evidence that it will contribute towards peace and/or save lives as part of a well-thought-through strategy. This is a viewpoint which could add an interesting perspective to the ongoing debate around the efficacy of the Government's Fusion Doctrine, an area ORG has been analysing in great depth.^[7]

Healey's Positions on Defence

Despite serving in his Shadow Cabinet, John Healey is said to have repeatedly clashed with Corbyn on national security matters. But like Nandy, he expressed similar concerns about the Government's proposed intervention in Syria in 2015, saying: "We may unwittingly strengthen [IS]," but also, "there remains the serious risk that we will kill civilians...in our quest to destroy [IS]"



militants.”^[8] Maybe, then, Healey could emerge as an ally to those NGOs, like ORG, calling on the UK Government to adopt a more innovative and transparent approach to the protection of civilians during partnered operations.

The most important priority for Healey in the coming year, however, will be Labour's response to the Government's Integrated Review. Despite the delay, owing to the current pandemic, it will be incumbent upon him and his Shadow Defence team to live up to Labour's 2019 election manifesto commitment (albeit in Opposition) to apply pressure on the Government to consider “the security challenges facing Britain, including new forms” of warfare like “remote warfare”.^[9] This would allow Healey to define his party's response to the Review and positively contribute to the debate on what the UK's foreign and security priorities should be post-Brexit.

The backgrounds of these two senior figures in Sir Keir's top team may see the party adopt a more pragmatic approach to scrutinising proposed deployments of Britain's Armed Forces, one that seeks to understand how military responses can contribute to wider solutions to political problems, and broader issues of insecurity, in the parts of the world the UK is currently engaged.

Labour as a Champion for International Peace

As part of Sir Keir's pitch for the leadership of his party, he pledged that the UK would be a “force for international peace and justice”. To deliver on this pledge, he said he would introduce a ‘Prevention of Military Intervention Act’ if elected prime minister. However, the only apparent difference between this and Labour's previously proposed War Powers Law, which aimed to transpose the

War Powers Convention into Law, was that the proposed legislative instrument would force a future PM to be upfront about the legal case for intervention.

But Sir Keir should take note of the limits of a legislative approach to democratising the UK's foreign and security policy. Our research has found that the WPC can serve as a useful check on bad strategy (as we discussed in this briefing here),^[10] however, the changing character of conflict and the emergence of remote forms of warfare have increasingly seen UK military personnel deployed in non-combat functions which are not covered by the WPC; and nor are they likely to be under a new law.

What would be more useful is for Sir Keir to consider policies that would infuse greater transparency and accountability into all aspects of UK defence and security policy, to ensure that UK interventions abroad – diplomatic, military and overseas aid – are oriented towards securing peace. One way of doing so would be supporting a broader role for the UK Parliament in holding the executive to account on its national security policy, an area that we explored in our recent submission of evidence to Parliament's Defence Committee.^[11]

Research by ORG has found that the risks posed directly to UK personnel may be less when compared with conventional military deployments, but as ORG's Research Manager, Abigail Watson, has said: "Remote warfare is not low risk; its risks are merely poorly understood."^[12] These risks manifest themselves in different ways: there is the direct harm posed to our military personnel deployed on non-combat operations – as was shown by the recent death of a British soldier in Iraq – but also the fact that "relatively small or not, poorly planned or poorly coordinated activities can still have a lasting and detrimental impact on peace and stability."^[13] These are issues Sir Keir should be mindful of as he comes to define Labour's new approach on UK national security matters.

New New Labour?

Sir Keir's background and political leanings are likely to continue the Labour Party's focus on international peace and justice spearheaded by Jeremy Corbyn. And while Sir Keir's Shadow Cabinet will be no less circumspect about proposed interventions when it comes to assessing their potential contribution to peace abroad, they are likely to be far more pragmatic than we have seen over the past five years. During his campaign, Sir Keir identified a role for Parliament in increasing the transparency of government decision-making around national security issues, but our research has found that a legislative instrument, such as the Prevention for Military Intervention Act, is insufficient to mitigate the dangers presented by the changing character of conflict. Sir Keir needs to go further if he is to play a part in making the UK the force for international peace and justice which he wishes it to be.

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About the Author

Liam Walpole is the Policy Manager at ORG's Remote Warfare Programme.

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Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

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