

Canada plans dramatic expansion of its role in Mideast war

By Roger Jordan
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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper presented a motion to parliament Tuesday endorsing the extension of Canadian military operations in Iraq for a further twelve months, and their expansion into Syria.

According to the Conservative government's plan, the Canadian Special Forces personnel currently deployed in northern Iraq, officially to assist and train Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, will remain in the country until 30 March 2016. Whilst the government continues to insist that no Canadian troops will be involved in ground combat in Iraq, the mission has already seen Canadian troops engaged in frontline firefights and helping direct air strikes.

The six CF-18 fighter jets that have been bombing Islamic State targets in Iraq since last October, together with two surveillance aircraft and an air re-fuelling plane, will now expand their operations into Syria.

Debate on Harper's motion is due to commence today, with a further day's debate scheduled for next Monday. A vote is expected on Monday evening.

The expansion of Canada's role in the conflict to Syria constitutes a new act of aggression and is a major step towards Canada's participation in an explicit war for regime change in Damascus.

Significantly, Harper has shifted his position from last October, when he said that Canadian participation in air strikes in Syria would be conditional on a formal request from Bashar al-Assad's government. On Tuesday, Harper declared that the Syrian government's approval is no longer needed. "In expanding our air strikes into Syria, the government has now decided that we will not seek the express consent of the Syrian government," he told parliament.

Hitherto, none of the US's western war-coalition partners have agreed to join it in bombing targets in Syria.

Under international law, such action is illegal and tantamount to an act of war. While the government continues to insist that the Canadian military intervention in the Middle East is directed solely at the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the US and its allies—including

Canada—have not renounced their goal of ousting Assad. Indeed, the official US war strategy is that ISIS's defeat should be the prelude to a renewed push for regime change in Damascus.

Responding to a question on the mission's expansion, Harper endeavoured to cast the US-led war coalition as opponents of extremism and defenders of the innocent. "Our allies have indicated they are taking necessary and proportionate military action in Syria on the basis that the government of Syria is unwilling or unable to prevent (ISIS) from staging operations and conducting attacks there, including attacks that ultimately include this country as a target."

What a fraud! The United States and its allies are in reality chiefly responsible for the growth of ISIS and other religious extremist groups in Syria and Iraq. As part of a divide and rule strategy, Washington stoked sectarian divisions in Iraq after its illegal 2003 invasion. In 2011, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war was seized upon by the imperialist powers to provide aid and military training to the so-called "rebels," composed overwhelmingly of Islamist forces such as the Al-Nusra Front and the groups which would later form ISIS. The Harper government and its ally in Washington only began viewing ISIS as a threat when it seized territory in Iraq and destabilized the entire region.

The attempt in the government's parliamentary motion to cast the intervention as a humanitarian exercise is aimed at concealing the mission's true purpose, which is the consolidation of US hegemony in the region against its strategic rivals. This includes a push for regime change in Damascus so as to remove the only government allied with Iran in the Middle East, and thereby increase pressure on Teheran to reach an accommodation with the west. More broadly, it is aimed at further isolating Russia and China.

The government's request for a twelve-month extension of the mission is significant. At the latest, Canada will hold a general election on 18 October. The Conservatives have already made plain their intention to frame the election around "jihadi terrorism," painting themselves as the only

party prepared to vigorously confront the “jihadis” at home and abroad. Through this bellicose and anti-Muslim appeal, the Conservatives hope to rally the most reactionary and backward sections of the population behind aggressive militarism in pursuit of Canadian imperialism’s interests abroad and sweeping attacks on democratic rights at home, as exemplified by Bill C-51.

The response of the two main opposition parties to the government’s expansion of the war reveals once again the lack of any principled opposition to militarist aggression within the Canadian ruling elite. Announcing their intention to vote against the motion, the Liberals criticized the government for its lack of a “clear” strategy. Liberal leader Justin Trudeau noted that if his party formed the government after the upcoming election, it would seek to shift the Canadian mission to focus exclusively on training Iraqi forces and providing humanitarian aid.

Thomas Mulcair, leader of the official opposition New Democrats (NDP), covered up the imperialist agenda being pursued by the government and sought to resurrect the NDP’s tattered anti-war credentials.

In his address to the House of Commons, Mulcair asserted, “Military planners will tell us that for a mission to succeed it must have two things. It must have a well-defined objective and a well-defined exit strategy. This mission has neither. The Conservatives simply have no plan.”

This is poppycock. While the military plans may still be a work-in-progress, the US has a very definite strategic agenda, one shared by the Canadian ruling class and that has underlain the repeated US military interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia over the past decade and more: removing all obstacles to American hegemony over what is the world’s most important oil-exporting region.

The NDP is not ignorant of this. If it chooses to cover it up, it is because it agrees with the goal of maintaining the strategic dominance of what for decades has been the Canadian bourgeoisie’s principal partner, differing merely on the best means to secure it.

Mulcair demonstrated this clearly in his subsequent remarks, in which he reiterated that “UN missions and NATO missions are the kinds of internationally sanctioned campaigns that New Democrats can and have been able to get behind.” He then went on to trumpet the NDP’s support for the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, stating, “In 2011, when Muammar Gaddafi started dropping bombs on his own civilian population, New Democrats supported the international efforts to protect Libyans... Of course, when the mission of protection of the civilian population became one of a so-called regime change, it was New Democrats who asked the right question—to replace it with what?”

This is a thoroughly dishonest presentation and on

multiple accounts. The NDP twice voted in favor of Canada’s participation in the Libyan war, including long after NATO had abandoned any pretense that it was anything but a war for regime change. Second, from the outset it was evident that the “rebels” that Canada, with the NDP’s full support, were promoting as agents of “democratic” change were in fact a reactionary cabal of Islamists, defectors from the Gaddafi regime, and longtime CIA assets.

This has again been sharply exposed thanks to an *Ottawa Citizen* article on secret Canadian military reports on the situation in Libya at the time of the NATO intervention in March 2011. The reports raised concerns that a NATO bombing mission to weaken or remove Gaddafi would only strengthen Islamist militias with ties to extremist groups. As an article by David Pugliese on the released material commented, “military members would privately joke about Canada’s CF-18s being part of ‘Al-Qaeda’s air force,’ since their bombing runs helped to pave the way for rebel groups aligned with the terrorist group.”

Mulcair’s response to Canada’s participation in striking ISIS targets in Syria was also highly revealing. The NDP leader repeated verbatim the imperialist propaganda used to argue for western military intervention to overthrow Assad. “It is especially disturbing,” said Mulcair, “to see the Prime Minister now openly considering an alliance of sorts with the brutal dictator and war criminal, Bashar al-Assad... It is a regime that not only uses chemical weapons on civilians, it uses snipers against women and children. It is a regime that actually collaborated with ISIS.”

Beyond Mulcair’s complete avoidance of the inconvenient truth that it was actually the US and its allies who collaborated with the extremist forces who now comprise ISIS against Assad, his open attack on the Damascus regime reflects the NDP’s unwavering support for the broader goal being pursued by the imperialist powers in the Mideast war—the imposition of pro-US regimes in Damascus and throughout the region.

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