

Death of Syrian infant exposes Canadian complicity in refugee crisis

By Keith Jones
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Prime Minister Stephen Harper has responded to a public outcry over Canada's callous treatment of refugees with crocodile tears, dissembling, and strident attacks on the opposition parties for not fully supporting the Canadian Armed Forces' combat mission in Iraq and Syria.

Harper and his Conservatives were forced into damage control after a Vancouver woman revealed that Alan Kurdi—the 3-year-old Syrian refugee whose corpse was photographed after being washed up on a Turkish beach—was her nephew and that Canada's government shares responsibility for his tragic fate.

Canadian authorities, explained Tima Kurdi, had blocked her attempts to bring family members fleeing the war in Syria to Canada. This included imposing onerous fees for their refugee applications, procedural delays, and claims that she hadn't proven they were "true" refugees.

Last March, Tima Kurdi's local MP even hand-delivered a letter from her to Immigration Minister Chris Alexander detailing her family's plight and pleading for his help. Neither Alexander nor Immigration Department officials deigned to reply.

Despairing of ever receiving help from Canada, Tima Kurdi paid for Alan, his five-year-old brother Galib, and their parents to cross to Europe by boat, as tens of thousands of people displaced by the wars in the Middle East and North Africa have attempted to do. But the boat capsized. Twelve people, including Tima Kurdi's two nephews and sister-in-law, perished.

Harper and his Conservatives spent much of Thursday and Friday feigning concern over the desperate plight of the refugees on Europe's borders.

A teary-eyed prime minister claimed to have thought of his own son when he had seen the harrowing images of Alan's corpse. Immigration Minister Alexander

announced he was temporarily suspending his campaign for Canada's October 19 federal election so he could return to Ottawa to consult with officials about Canada's response to the refugee crisis. Harper's election campaign schedule was reshuffled.

But the Conservatives soon settled on a new set of talking-points—a series of lies trumpeting the purported generosity of Canada's refugee and foreign aid programs and propaganda for Canada's participation in the current US-led war in the Middle East.

Speaking in British Columbia Thursday, Harper urged people not to drive themselves "crazy with grief" and recognize that there are strict limits on what Canada can do to aid the refugees. The real issue, he declared, was to get at the "root cause" of the refugee crisis. This he claimed was the growth of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, or alternately ISIL).

Referring to the Kurdis, upon whom his government had willfully shut the door, Harper declared, "I don't know how you say you want to help that family, but want to walk away from the military mission to help stop ISIL from killing tens of millions of those [same] people."

The next day, Harper was even more forthright, weaving the refugee issue into his election stump speech, which from day one has had as a central theme the claim that only the Conservatives are prepared to fight "Jihadi terrorism" whether abroad or at home.

Responding to NDP leader Thomas Mulcair's charge that the government was doing nothing to come to the aid of the refugees and advocating "more war as the solution," Harper touted war as the "humanitarian compassionate" option. The NDP, said Harper, has taken, the "totally irresponsible position" that "we can resolve this crisis just with refugee policy."

Even as Harper was promoting this ultra-reactionary

line, reports were surfacing in the media about the Canadian military's responsibility for the deaths of more than two dozen civilians in a bombing raid in Iraq last January and the attempts by the top brass to cover it up.

The reality is both ISIS and the refugee crisis are products of the series of wars that US imperialism, with the support of Canada's elite, has waged in the broader Middle East and Africa over the past quarter-century. Dressed up as humanitarian interventions to thwart aggression or otherwise further democracy and human rights, these have been colonial wars that have blown up one country after another, displacing millions and fanning sectarian conflicts. And all in the interests of shoring up US hegemony over what is the world's principal oil-exporting region.

Moreover, these wars have often seen the US—and Canada, as in the 2011 war for “regime change” in Libya—partnering with the very Islamist forces whose crimes Harper invokes to justify the latest US war.

This is certainly true of the forces that now comprise ISIS. Until recently they were proxies of the US and its Mideast allies, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey, in the US-fomented war to overthrow the Assad government in Syria.

Canada's elite and all its political parties—from the NDP, Bloc Quebecois and the Greens to the Conservatives—are complicit. Since the 1991 Gulf War, Canada has played a leading role in one US-led war after another, generally with all party support.

The NDP opposes the current Canadian military mission in the Middle East. But its opposition is solely tactical. It favors Canada arming the US-aligned Iraqi government and Peshmerga militia, as well as the US drive for regime change in Syria.

As for Canada's refugee resettlement program, it has been dramatically curtailed, in violation of Canada's international obligations, over the past two decades under successive Liberal and Conservative governments.

Under the Liberals, Canadian refugee law was changed so as to deny the right even to apply for refugee status for most refugee claimants who arrive via the US or another reputedly “safe country.” Under the Harper government, the refugee determination process has been “streamlined” to provide for swift deportation, and with virtually no right of appeal, of

citizens of countries declared by Canada's government to be democratic. On this basis, large numbers of persecuted Roma from Eastern Europe have seen their refugee claims effectively dismissed at the outset.

The Harper government also stripped refugee claimants of much of their health coverage. A Federal Court found the measure unconstitutional and ordered the coverage restored, but the government is appealing the ruling.

As a result of these changes the number of persons granted refugee status has steadily declined. In 2014 there were roughly 23,000 as compared with 35,000 in 2005.

In the case of Syria, Canada has admitted just 2,374 refugees since 2013 although the war has displaced millions. Of these, just 642 or 27 percent came with government assistance. The government insists that families and various NGOs join forces to sponsor the vast bulk of the Syrian refugees, although this is a much lengthier process generally taking a year and a half.

Moreover, the government, in a blatant act of discrimination, justified with vague claims about security concerns, and with the aim of pandering to the Christian right, is directing Canada's derisory Syrian refugee effort exclusively at non-Muslims.

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