Canadian imperialism preparing for war in the Middle East

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Through a series of recent diplomatic and military measures, Canada has deepened its involvement in US preparations for war in the Middle East. These include: deploying a navy frigate off the coast of Syria, instituting new sanctions against Iran, and negotiating closer military cooperation with Israel.

At the end of November, Conservative Defence Minister Peter McKay announced that Canada will maintain a Royal Canadian Navy frigate in the Eastern Mediterranean until the end of 2012. Though the frigate is officially patrolling waters off Syria as part of a NATO counter-terrorism mission, McKay openly admitted that its presence serves as a military signal to the Syrian government.

Like US-allied regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, Syria's autocratic regime has brutally suppressed opposition protests. But Syria's government—because it is allied with Washington's primary regional rival, Iran, and represses opposition groups like the Free Syria Army that are funded and sheltered by Syria's US-allied neighbour, Turkey—has found itself the target of increasing bullying and threats from the Western powers.

This has included open discussion of whether the US should unleash its military, under the cloak of "human rights," "democracy," and the "responsibility to protect," to effect regime-change, as was done earlier this year in Libya.

Explicitly referencing the fate of the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi, McKay struck a bellicose posture. "I think," said Canada's defence minster, " it's fair to say that a lot of dictators are on notice that this type of behaviour isn't going to be tolerated."

"How," continued MacKay, "we go about it and what comes next is done on… an escalating scale before making any final decisions around intervention."

With the Canadian government in ongoing talks with its NATO allies about the crisis in Syria, McKay admitted the possibility that "…further action will be required."

"There's no question having a ship in the region... gives us the capability to respond should certain things transpire," he added. The HMCS Vancouver, which blockaded the Libyan ports of Misrata, Tripoli, Tobruk, and Sirte during NATO's war on Libya, has sailed east to take up this provocative new position. It will be relieved by the HMCS Charlottetown in 2012.

The day after McKay proclaimed the Canadian military presence off the Mediterranean coast of Syria, the Conservative government announced harsh new financial sanctions against Iran–a move it coordinated with similar announcements by Britain and the US. Canada banned all financial transactions with the Iranian state, Iranian companies or individuals (except for payments agreed to under pre-existing contracts or remittances to family members below $40, 000).

Effectively preventing any new business dealings with Iran, the Canadian sanctions will have a relatively small impact compared to, for example, the British government's barring the Iranian Central Bank from the finance houses of London. But the sanctions are significant in that they demonstrate the willingness of the Canadian bourgeoisie to line up behind American imperialism as it seeks to isolate and pressure the Iranian regime. Though ostensibly announced in response to an International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) report concerning the Iranian nuclear program released November 8, the coordinated sanctions had their genesis in August 2011, when British diplomats first broached the subject.

According to an unnamed diplomatic official, Conservative Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird "instructed his officials to prepare a plan, and pushed for it. He later told the British, via senior diplomats, that Canada would be 'absolutely' prepared to act with them." Diplomats worked on drafts of potential sanctions through the fall, and, in October, Baird met with his British counterpart, Foreign Secretary William Hague, to confirm their coming joint action.

Accompanying the sanctions, Canada's delegation to the IAEA co-sponsored a resolution to the body's Board of Governors demanding that Iran cease any attempts to develop nuclear weapons. The Canadian delegate concluded his submission with the declaration, "The question is not if, but rather the degree to which, we will act."

With this pretext in mind, the Harper Conservative government has singled out Iran repeatedly as the country that "…represents the most significant threat to peace and security today." Like the widely repeated lies about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the poorly substantiated and weakly worded accusations leveled against Iran in the IAEA report have been used by the great powers to intimidate the regime and prepare public opinion for the outbreak of war.

Claiming only the desire for civilian nuclear power, Tehran disputes the IAEA report's conclusion that "…there are *indications* that some activities *relevant* to the *development* of a nuclear device . . . *may* still be going on." [Emphasis added] Where the Iranian regime differs from nuclear-armed states like India, Pakistan, and Israel—all of whom have refused to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty on nuclear weapons–is that US imperialism views Iran not as a strategic ally, but as a challenger to its hegemony over the markets and natural resources of the Middle East. What is cause for a campaign of sanctions and military aggression in the case of Iran remains

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unmentioned publicly and is encouraged when it comes to US allies, regardless of their history of aggression.

The Harper government, underlining the hypocrisy of its calls for "peace," has been a vocal supporter of Iran's primary regional antagonist, Israel. After a November meeting with his Israeli counterpart, Ehud Barak, McKay proclaimed that "Israel needs strong, reliable partners, [of] which Canada is certainly one... I would argue they could not find a more supportive country on the planet."

The Harper government is currently in negotiations, expected to be finalized by the end of the year, on a series of military cooperation agreements with Israel that would cover, among other fields, intelligence sharing, joint research and development of military technology, and personnel exchange programs. McKay refused to rule out a Mutual Defence pact with Israel, which would require Canada to respond with military force should Israel go to war–only claiming that the subject was not discussed in the most recent round of negotiations.

The Harper Conservatives have provided, alongside these technical and material resources, strident political support for the military actions undertaken by the Israeli state, fully backing its 2008 assault in the Gaza Strip and justifying the mass civilian deaths—including that of a Canadian UN observer—resulting from its 2006 invasion and aerial bombardment of Lebanon.

It is widely recognized among Canada's ruling elite that a mutual defence pact with Israel, a state with a long history of militarist aggression and a raging debate among its elite over the merits of a preemptive strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, would be unwise. Even the organ of the neo-conservative right wing, the ardently pro-Zionist *National Post*, ran an editorial questioning whether Canada has "…the capacity to rush to Israel's aid, given the toll taken by 10 years of war in Afghanistan on the Canadian Forces?" and "…would it be in the national interest to do so?"

Despite the reticence of even their most rabid supporters, the Conservatives have maintained their position, refusing to rule out a Mutual Defence pact with Israel and repeating that "the defence co-operation details will be disclosed when we sign."

The eager participation of the Harper government in the intrigues of imperialist diplomacy in the Middle East, lending its modest weight to that of its dominant NATO allies, is but the latest manifestation of the Canadian bourgeoisie's turn to militarist aggression. Inaugurated by the Liberal governments of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin, who launched Canada's participation in both the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia and the occupation of Afghanistan, this turn to militarism has only intensified since the Conservatives first came to power in 2006.

This outburst of imperialism from the Canadian bourgeoisie has necessitated a massive buildup of military force. Canada's military spending, adjusted for inflation, is now greater than at any time since the Second World War. The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), already with bases in Germany and Kuwait, plan to open at least three more bases in critical geostrategic locations.

The CAF, now in the new role of counter-insurgency war "trainers," continues to help sustain the US-backed stooge regime of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan and played a prominent role in the bombardment of Libya.

This turn towards imperialist aggression rests upon a consensus among Canada's ruling elite. The trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP), like the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Quebecois, supported Canada's leading role in the Afghan counter- insurgency war and twice voted in favor of Canada's participation in the NATO assault on Libya.

Interim NDP leader Nycole Turmel released a statement in October that celebrated the barbaric death of Muammar Gaddafi and gushed that "our troops have done a wonderful job in Libya over the past few months. … New Democrats are proud to have supported Libyans in their quest for democracy."

The true character of Canada's war in Libya, in spite the ritualistic invocations of "democracy" by the NDP leader and the other parties of the bourgeois political establishment, was graphically displayed in an elaborate victory ceremony staged by the Harper government last month. Even sections of the corporate media observed that the display of military might and naked imperialist ambition was reminiscent of the triumphs of Ancient Rome. In an outdoor ceremony on Parliament Hill, Canada's governor-general inspected an honour guard of CAF troops as a squadron of CF-18 fighter jets flew overhead and a 21-gun salute rang out.

Later in the Senate Chamber, seated on chairs of rich, dark wood lined with red velvet, the unelected representatives of Canada's ruling elite awarded Lieutenant-General Charles Bouchard, the Canadian military officer charged with command of the NATO campaign, the Meritorious Service Cross for his "…demonstration of exceptional operational and strategic acumen."

Addressing this body, Prime Minister Harper called it "a day of honour."

"We are celebrating a great military success … Soldier for soldier, sailor for sailor, airman for airman, the Canadian Armed Forces are the best in the world.

"Numbers don't tell the whole story, but it bears repeating that Canadian fighter jets flew nearly a thousand sorties, roughly 10 per cent of all sorties –without caveats against Gadhafi's military," boasted Harper. "Canadians should also know that the taking of Tripoli by rebel forces was materially assisted by the CF-18 missions that cleared away Gadhafi's remaining mechanized forces."

In a blunt warning to Syria, Iran and the other geo-strategic rivals of the NATO imperialist cabal, Harper reiterated Canada's commitment to use its developing military might in further and bloodier interventions. "So let no one ever question whether Canada is prepared to stay the course in defence of what is right," he declared. "… [T]hose who talk the talk of human rights must from time to time be prepared to likewise walk the walk."

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