

Australian government weighs up joining US air war in Iraq

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The Australian government is actively considering the commitment of military forces as part of the widening US military intervention in Iraq, according to a front-page article in today's *Australian*. While the newspaper focussed on Australian war planes joining the US in air strikes against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias, it also pointed to other options including the dispatch of ground forces.

The article was written by the *Australian's* foreign editor Greg Sheridan who has close connections with the security establishment in both Canberra and Washington. Murdoch's newspaper, and Sheridan in particular, have played a prominent role in whipping up a terrorist scare campaign that would be used to justify Australian military involvement.

The Coalition government was one of the first to declare it was fully on board the new US air war in Iraq, parroting concerns about the fate of beleaguered Yazidi minority in Iraq. The Australian military has already carried out so-called humanitarian air drops. Speaking in London on August 12 after high-level intelligence briefings from British officials, Prime Minister Tony Abbott declared that "we certainly don't rule out" military involvement in US-led operations in Iraq.

Since then, the US has dramatically expanded the scope of its military intervention. The plight of the Yazidis has been pushed into the background as US fighter jets and drones have carried out scores of air strikes against ISIS targets in support of an Iraqi/Kurdish ground offensive to retake the strategic Mosul Dam in northern Iraq.

Speaking at Adelaide University last Thursday, Abbott indicated Canberra was in discussion with the US and other allies, such as Britain, over Australian involvement in Iraq. "We are talking to our partners

about how we might contribute to international efforts to protect people against the advances of ISIS terrorists," he said.

Abbott declared that there had to be "a clear and proportionate role for us" and, in line with Obama's rhetoric, ruled out anything on the scale of the 2003 US-led invasion. Such caveats are meaningless, however, as the US expands its intervention. Top American officials are already indicating that US air strikes could be extended to ISIS targets inside Syria.

The *Australian* outlined the alternatives being considered: "The three main military options for Australian involvement are renewed humanitarian air drops, deployment of special forces and ground-attack roles for our aircraft. It is also possible that a training or mentoring role of Iraqi forces could be undertaken by Australian soldiers. It is understood that all potential roles are being examined for the Australian forces."

Citing "Australian analytical agencies," the article referred to the concern in security circles that "if the US abdicates in Iraq... its global credibility will be severely undermined." While not directly referred to, the overriding concern in Canberra is to maintain the credibility of the US "pivot to Asia"—an all-embracing strategy aimed at undermining China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region, including military preparations for war.

Successive Labor and Coalition governments have committed Australian forces to every major US-led war and intervention over the past two decades, including the 1990–91 Gulf War against Iraq and invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in order to secure US support for Australian imperialist interests in Asia and internationally. Since 2010, Canberra has greatly expanded US access to Australian military bases as part of its support for the US "pivot."

Like the previous Labor government, the Coalition has played a particularly provocative role in supporting US interventions in the Middle East, and also this year in Ukraine against Russia. Abbott and his ministers have exploited lurid media accounts of ISIS beheadings and persecution of Iraqi minorities to stir up fears of “home-grown terrorists” returning to Australia.

Last week Abbott pounced on the execution of journalist James Foley to suggest that beheadings could also take place in Australia. “It just goes to show,” he declared, “that this is not just something that happens elsewhere, it could happen in countries like Australia if we relax our vigilance against terrorism and potential terrorism here on our shores.”

Having ignored similar acts by Islamist militias in Syria as part of the US-led regime change operation, the government is now seizing on these atrocities as the pretext for Australian involvement in the US intervention in Iraq. It is also exploiting this scare campaign to justify draconian new anti-terror legislation, including forcing those visiting “designated areas” such as Syria to prove they have not been engaged in terrorist activity, or face heavy penalties.

The anti-terror hysteria serves to distract public attention from the government’s current political impasse over its austerity budget and to project sharpening social tensions outward against an external enemy. Amid a worsening global economic outlook, particularly in China, the corporate elite is pushing for sweeping measures to destroy key welfare entitlements that have generated widespread public opposition.

The Abbott government’s backing for the new US war in Iraq has support across the political and media establishment, including from the Labor Party and the Greens. Both parties initially gave their support to the so-called humanitarian mission and have not criticised the escalating US military operations inside Iraq. Greens parliamentarian Adam Bandt declared that “everyone is aghast at the terror we’re witnessing,” only adding the rider that there should be a parliamentary debate before any dispatch of Australian troops.

Responding to today’s report in the *Australian*, Labor leader Bill Shorten gave his unequivocal support for committing Australian military forces to Iraq. Having made clear the Labor Party had had “constructive discussions” with the government on the previous

airdrops in Iraq, Shorten indicated that he was available for briefings on expanded Australian operations. “This is not an issue of political debate. We will do this professionally,” he said.



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