

Australia expands military involvement in Middle East war

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The Abbott government, backed by the opposition Labor Party, is stepping up Australia's military involvement in the US-led Iraq-Syria war. This week, Australian fighter jets conducted further air strikes in Iraq while Foreign Minister Julie Bishop flew to Baghdad to insist on the finalisation of a delayed legal agreement for the deployment of 200 elite SAS troops.

Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, the Vice Chief of the Australian Defence Force, told a Senate estimates hearing on Wednesday that Australian war planes had dropped bombs on alleged Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) targets on three occasions. He said Super Hornets had flown 56 sorties over Iraq, clocking up more than 400 flying hours.

During an earlier briefing in Canberra, Chief of Joint Operations Rear Admiral David Johnston explained that Australia's operations had "surged" in Iraq to enable "other coalition forces to intensify their efforts in Syria." Apart from Britain and France, Australia is the only US ally to have conducted air strikes in Iraq.

Despite the government's claim that its mission is confined to Iraq, with no "current intention" to join the fighting in Syria, Australian forces are assisting the US to focus on the real thrust of the war—a renewed drive by Washington to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

ISIS "terrorists" have never been Washington's primary target. In fact, the US and its allies in the Gulf States have funded, armed and trained Sunni extremist groups, including ISIS, as part of the regime-change operation against Assad.

Washington's appreciation for Australia's contribution was evident when US President Barack Obama held a half-hour phone call with Prime Minister Tony Abbott on Wednesday. According to a White House statement: "The President thanked Prime

Minister Abbott for Australia's significant efforts in Iraq."

In an attempt to whip up enthusiasm for the war, the tabloid press has reveled in the gory detail of reports by military chiefs that Australian planes hit ISIS targets. "Aussie jets kill dozens of terrorists in the Middle East after successful operations," was one headline in the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*.

Abbott's government was anxious for Australia to be among the first countries on the frontline of the US war, and received unconditional support from the Labor Party. However, Australian pilots aborted their first strike in Iraq on October 5, reportedly under a "red card" system that military spokesmen claimed was designed to minimise the risk of civilian casualties.

Chief of the Defence Force Mark Binskin referred to "targeting directives" set by the government, consistent with rules of engagement. These rules are kept secret from the public, as they were during the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Earlier, in announcing the government's approval of air strikes, Abbott declared that "you can never guarantee that there will be no collateral damage," but "the Australian armed forces never ever deliberately target civilians."

That flies in the face of the record of Australian forces in Iraq and Afghanistan in killing scores of civilians, including in ground attacks on homes.

Australia's commitment of 200 SAS elite commandos is also critical to the threadbare US war coalition. At present, it is the largest contingent of ground forces other than the US which has 1,400 military personnel in Iraq, including "special adviser" units in Baghdad and the northern Kurdish city of Irbil. Britain has sent a "small specialist team" of 12 to Irbil, officially to train Kurdish peshmerga forces, and Canada has 69 special forces personnel there on the

same pretext.

The Abbott government has provided no explanation for the month-long delay in finalising an agreement with the Iraqi regime for the SAS deployment. Despite intense pressure on Iraq for such a deal, the SAS troops remained stranded in the United Arab Emirates. Bishop's trip to Baghdad to demand an agreement was the second visit by an Australian minister, following an unsuccessful trip by Defence Minister David Johnston.

One thing is clear. The Abbott government insisted on a "status of forces agreement" that gave Australian SAS commandos the same protections from liability for civilian deaths as those already given to US special forces. On October 18, Abbott hinted at irritation with the delay, insisting that it was "only right and proper" that legal immunities be granted.

This preoccupation with shielding the SAS troops from prosecution exposes the government's lie that they will be involved only in "training, advising and assisting" the Iraqi army. Australia's SAS forces are highly valued by the Pentagon precisely because they have a record, reinforced in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, of carrying out assassinations, detentions and other criminal covert operations.

The SAS deployment has provoked opposition in Iraq. Paul McGeough, a veteran Middle East correspondent, reported in Fairfax Media newspapers that senior figures in the Shiite militias that are propping up the Iraqi army condemned the proposed "status of forces" agreement.

Haji Jaafar al-Bindawi, chief of training and logistics for the Imam Ali Brigades, told McGeough that the Australian SAS soldiers "should go home." Adnan al-Shahmani, an MP who serves as a liaison for several militias, said: "Foreign forces? Never! We don't need them ... in combat or as advisers."

McGeough reported that the militias' objections were part of a broader distrust of Western intentions, following the US-led occupation of Iraq in 2003 and its catastrophic aftermath. He said the militias also saw the selective use of air strikes as pursuing an agenda directed against Iran, which backs Assad in Syria and supports the Shiite-dominated government in Iraq.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Al-Jafari, who belongs to the dominant Shiite coalition of parties, hinted at these objections at a joint media conference with the Australian foreign minister. "We consider ground

troops from other countries entering Iraq is a red line," he said.

In media interviews, Bishop provided no information about the status of forces agreement. She claimed that the Iraqi government wanted it kept confidential because "they don't wish to let the terrorist organisations know the details of the operations." In reality, the secrecy serves only one purpose—to hide from the Iraqi people, and the Australian people, just what the SAS forces will be carrying out and the extent to which they will be shielded from prosecution.

On her return to Australia, Bishop announced a \$15 million increase in humanitarian aid for Iraq and Syria, taking the combined total to about \$150 million since the US-backed regime-change operation began in 2011. This pittance—an estimated 16 million people inside Iraq and Syria need help—stands in contrast to the \$500 million a year being allocated for Australia's military operation.

The latest US intervention is no more a "humanitarian" or "anti-terrorist" mission than the 2003 invasion of Iraq was about "weapons of mass destruction." Obama, like his predecessor Bush, is determined to shore up US dominance in the energy-rich Middle East. The bipartisan lineup in Canberra is based on a calculation that the economic and strategic interests of Australian imperialism depend on continued US global hegemony.



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