

Canada's Harper promotes new police powers and war

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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative government have responded to last week's terrorist attacks in Paris by ratcheting up their efforts to strengthen the national-security apparatus and legitimize Canada's participation in the new US-led war in the Middle East.

During a visit to Metro Vancouver last Thursday, Harper sought to whip up a climate of fear, declaring Canada to be under assault from Islamic extremists. "The fact of the matter is this," declared Harper, "... the international jihadist movement has declared war. They have declared war on anybody who does not think and act exactly as they wish they would think and act."

His comments sought to utilize the attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, about which numerous outstanding questions remain, to justify the quick adoption of yet another anti-terrorist law. Seeking to create a climate of fear by invoking the threat posed by an allegedly omnipresent "Jihadist movement," he went on, "This is a movement that has declared war on Canada specifically and shown that it has the ability to develop the capacity to execute attacks on this soil."

Since lone gunman Michael Zehaf-Bibeau attacked the Canadian parliament on 22 October, Harper and his government have repeatedly portrayed Canada as a nation under siege. This is in spite of the fact that no connection between the October attack and any domestic, let alone international, terrorist organization has been shown. This did not stop Harper from describing Zehaf-Bibeau's disorientated outburst and the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* as twin examples of the Jihadists' war.

Government spokesmen have used last weekend's arrest on terrorism charges of three Ottawa-area men, all of them young adults and at least two of them only recent converts to Islam, to lend muster to this fear campaign. Speaking to the CBC yesterday, Public Security Minister Steven Blaney praised police for apprehending the three,

twin brothers Ashton and Carlos Larmond and Suliman Mohamed, but insisted further legislation is needed to ensure "our police officers (can) take action."

Thus far police have divulged next to nothing about the reasons for the charges, including to the men's lawyers. According to Mohamed's lawyer, Doug Baum, the prosecutor told him "that because of the timing of the arrests ... the investigation itself may not have been complete, and that the disclosure—which is normally given out—is not available at this time." The men's family and friends have all expressed shock at the charges.

In his Vancouver speech, Harper sought to portray his government as the defender of democracy and civil liberties. In reality, it has upheld the interests of the rich and super-rich, slashing public and social services, raising the retirement age and all but illegalizing strikes, while expanding the national-security state, including asserting a blanket right to spy on Canadians' electronic communications, and joining every US-led war from Afghanistan and Libya to the new war in Iraq and Syria.

In the wake of last October's attack on Parliament and the killing of a soldier in St. Jean-sur-Richelieu two days before, the government rushed through two pieces of legislation that further expand the powers of the national security apparatus. Bill C-44, which was adopted in early December, grants anonymity to informants of the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) in court proceedings and formally permits CSIS to spy on Canadians abroad. In addition, a law presented as a clampdown on cyberbullying has given additional powers to the police to obtain subscription information for phone users and metadata from their communications.

The Conservatives had considered tabling a third piece of legislation in parliament before Christmas, but apparently feared some of the proposed measures might spark an outcry. Harper now plans to cut short any further hold-ups by seizing on the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. "I

anticipate that we will be moving forward very early in the new session with additional legislative proposals,” said Harper last Thursday.

The new legislation is expected to contain provisions expanding the power of law enforcement officers to carry out preemptive arrests and detentions. It will also likely follow a 2006 British law that made “incitement” or even so-called “encouragement” of terrorism a criminal offence. This legislation has been used to target those with no connection whatsoever to any terrorist act or plot. Harper said of the coming legislation that it would contain “additional powers to make sure that our security agencies have the range of tools available to them to identify potential terror threats and to take arrests and other actions.”

Harper’s other key message has been the need to expand Canada’s military action in the Middle East in support of US imperialism’s drive to consolidate its control over what is the world’s most important oil-exporting region. Citing Canada’s support along with its allies for military action against a jihadist army occupying wide areas of Iraq and Syria, he said that the Islamic State (ISIS) was using its resources to increase the terrorist threat “to a whole new global level.”

Making clear that his attempt to whip up a war fever was bound up with the rapidly approaching decision on whether to extend Canadian participation in the Mideast war beyond April, he added that one of the major criteria in taking a decision would be “the kind of risk it poses to our country.”

The same day Harper delivered his speech, the military revealed that CF-18 fighter jets had participated in seven bombing raids over Iraq in the past two weeks. Immediately following the approval of parliament for a six-month Mideast mission in early October, leading military figures like Canadian Armed Forces head General Tom Lawson and Harper himself openly stated that the conflict would last much longer.

A third factor accounting for Harper’s fear-mongering speech is the approaching federal election. Although it is scheduled for October 19, there are many signs that the Conservatives are planning to circumvent their own fixed-election law and call a Spring vote.

The Conservatives have already served notice that they intend to place the “terrorism” issue at the center of their campaign. Their aim in doing so will be to divert attention from the mounting social crisis, including increasing social inequality and economic insecurity, and to stoke an explicitly bellicose Canadian nationalism.

A further critical objective will be to rally support from Canada’s big business elite, by demonstrating that the Conservatives are the most aggressive and ruthless defenders of their interests at home and abroad. Harper and his minions have repeatedly suggested that the opposition parties are “soft” on terrorism and lackluster in asserting Canadian imperialist interests on the world stage.

In this regard, they are hoping to exploit an avalanche of hostile corporate media commentary on the Liberals’ decision not to support last October’s parliamentary resolution authorizing Canada’s participation in the new Mideast War.

The reality is that all of the major parties, including the trade union-aligned NDP, fully embrace the ruling elite’s agenda of austerity and imperialist war. The opposition of the Liberals and NDP to the Canadian deployment in October was driven solely by tactical differences, with both opposition parties advocating Canadian Armed Forces’ supply missions to arm those fighting ISIS as well as “humanitarian” operations in the region that could easily be transformed into military intervention at a later date.

In a further indication of the Conservative government’s reactionary plans, the Prime Minister’s Office announced last week that Richard Fadden, head of CSIS from 2009 to 2013 and the current deputy Minister of National Defence, has been named as Harper’s National Security Adviser. Fadden has repeatedly spoken out on the gravity of the terrorism threat facing Canada and the urgent need for the national security apparatus to be given greater budgets and powers. (See, “Who is Richard Fadden, Canada’s new national security adviser?”.)



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