

Canadian Special Forces engage in ground combat in Iraq

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21 January 2015

Canadian Special Forces engaged in direct combat with Islamic State (ISIS) fighters in Iraq sometime last week, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) revealed at a press conference Monday.

In their press briefing, General Jonathan Vance and Brigadier General Mike Rouleau sought to downplay the incident. According to Rouleau, the special forces had advanced to the frontline as part of their mission to provide “advise-and-assist training” to Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in northern Iraq. When they were fired on, the CAF personnel responded with sniper fire, “neutralizing” ISIS “mortar and machine gun positions,” in a move that Rouleau characterized as purely one of “self-defense.”

Some seventy Canadian special forces personnel from four units—Joint Task Force 2, the Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR), 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron, and the Canadian Joint Incident Response Unit—are currently deployed in northern Iraq. Their stated goal is to train the Peshmerga to use a variety of weapons and military technologies, including rocket-propelled grenade launchers and global positioning systems, as well as to teach them how to defuse bombs and direct air strikes.

But even the information provided Vance, one of the CAF’s top commanders, and Rouleau, the commander of special forces’ operations, contradicts this narrative. Rather it indicates that Canada’s military is playing an increasingly important role in planning Peshmerga attacks and in coordinating its operations with air strikes by the US and its war coalition allies, Canada included.

Rouleau said that the special forces had advanced to the front line so as to “visualize” an operation they had been planning with the Kurdish fighters. He added that the Canadian special forces spend much of their time on the frontlines of the fighting in Iraq—some 20 percent.

As well as engaging in last week’s gun battle, Canadian

special forces soldiers have, according to Vance and Rouleau, called in and “sighted” a total of 13 air strikes by coalition planes since early November, providing ground-based assistance to direct the bombing raids. On one occasion, Canadian forces provided photos of ISIS fighters to be targeted, and in other incidents, they have guided warplanes to their targets with lasers.

When the House of Commons voted last October to support the government’s decision to deploy CAF personnel to Iraq, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper assured parliament that this would not be a “combat mission.” The special forces mission would be limited to training and advising the Kurdish militia. He pledged that the only direct Canadian involvement in military action would be by the six CF-18 fighters that Parliament authorized to fly bombing raids over Iraq from Kuwait.

Since early November those fighters and two CAF surveillance aircraft and a midair-refueling plane have flown a total 358 missions over Iraq, including 28 bombing raids.

While the opposition Liberals and New Democrats have opposed the deployment, their differences are only of a tactical character. They have called for the stepped-up supply of weapons to the US-organized Iraqi army and Kurdish militia, as well as “humanitarian” aid to the region. Moreover, as attested by their full-throated support for the Israeli invasion of Gaza last summer and their promotion of the US-armed insurgents in Syria, they fully support Washington’s war objectives—the shoring up of US hegemony over the world’s most important oil-exporting region.

Even before the Canadian fighter jets had arrived in Kuwait, claims that the CAF intervention would be restricted to a brief six-month mission were undermined by leading military officials, who repeatedly declared that eliminating ISIS would take much longer. This message

was reiterated by Vance on Monday. “The complete degradation and defeat of ISIL,” he declared, “will likely take years.”

Vance added that Canada’s military is making preparations to extend the mission. “The Armed Forces are prepared and preparing to extend if we’re told,” said Vance.

As Canada’s involvement in the US’s new Mideast war continues to deepen, the Conservative government is persisting in its refusal to reveal any details about the mission’s cost. Defense Minister Rob Nicholson rejected opposition demands last fall for an estimate of the cost of the deployment and more recently refused to answer a request from the *Toronto Star* to reveal how much Ottawa has spent so far, even though the CAF top brass has reportedly regularly given such figures to his department.

Coming as discussions intensify in the US over a Congressional resolution to officially authorize the war including in Syria—where Washington’s main objective remains the overthrow of the Assad regime, a close ally of Iran and Russia—the disclosure that Canadian troops have engaged in fighting on the ground will undoubtedly be used by the Conservatives to lay the groundwork for an extension of Canada’s role in the new Mideast War. Claims that Canadian soldiers are at risk could also become the pretext for a broader intervention involving larger numbers of ground troops.

Prime Minister Harper, it need be added, has repeatedly sought to rally support for Canada’s participation in the Mideast war by tying it to the need to counter an ostensible threat from Islamacist terrorists in Canada. Thus the government rushed to label last October’s killings of CAF personnel in Ottawa and St. Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec by lone, troubled individuals “terrorist attacks” and after this month’s terrorist outrages in Paris Harper declared that Canada is at war with Islamicist extremism.



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