

Australian opposition Labor leader visits troops in Iraq

Will Morrow
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Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten visited Australian troops in Iraq this week, underlining the party's unconditional support for Australia's participation in the US-led war in the Middle East and Washington's broader militarist agenda.

Shorten's statement released on Wednesday, upon his return from the Middle East, was a fawning glorification of the Australian military. "I was humbled by the men and women I met at both the Australian Force base in the Middle East Region and in Baghdad; their dedication, skill and sense of purpose," the statement read. "I conveyed federal Labor's bipartisan support for the current mission in Iraq to the personnel on the ground, and our thanks for their service and sacrifice."

Shorten repeated the central lie used by both major parties to justify Australia's participation in the war in Iraq. He declared: "All Australians should be proud of the work our Defence Force personnel are doing to defeat Daesh [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] and enhance the capabilities of Iraqi Security Forces."

In reality, the latest war in Iraq has nothing to do with combating "terrorism." The initial pretext for the war, that it was necessary to launch a limited "humanitarian" mission to protect the Yazidi minority in Iraq's north, has rapidly been dropped. The intervention has blown out to a full-scale air war, stretching into Syria.

The purpose of this war is to ensure the domination of US imperialism and its allies over the geo-strategic region of the Middle East and its vast oil reserves. Al Qaeda, which did not exist in Iraq before the 2003 US and Australian intervention, only gained a footing in the country due to the occupying forces' promotion of sectarian fratricidal warfare between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in order to suppress opposition to the US-led

occupation.

ISIS itself is the creation of the US proxy war in Syria aimed at overthrowing President Bashar al-Assad. For years, the US and allies such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have funnelled arms and money to its reactionary Sunni Islamist proxy forces in Syria. While these forces were doing the dirty work of US imperialism, their documented crimes were overlooked by the Obama administration and the international media. It was only when ISIS crossed the border into Iraq last June and threatened US interests that Washington seized on ISIS as the pretext to launch its new military intervention in the Middle East.

As part of the intervention, Australia has dispatched six F-18 fighter-bomber super hornets, accompanied by 400 military personnel, as well as 200 special forces commandos. The Australian bombers have already killed hundreds of people, including an unknown number of civilians.

Shorten's trip was preceded by revelations two weeks ago that the Australian commandos are attached to an elite brigade of Iraqi special forces, in the Counter-Terrorism Service, which has long functioned as sectarian Shiite death squads, murdering any opponents of the US puppet government in Baghdad.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott's government has broadly hinted that it is prepared to increase the number of forces in Iraq. Shorten's trip is a signal that Labor would support such an escalation. Emphasising the bipartisan unity, Shorten publicly thanked Abbott for organising his passage to Iraq.

Shorten's statement directly tied the operations of the military in Iraq to the upcoming centenary of Anzac Day, which marks the landing of the Australian army and allied forces in Gallipoli, Turkey, during WWI. It declared: "In the centenary of the Anzac, it was

humbling to see these men and women continue that proud tradition.”

The Anzac Day centenary celebrations are part of a four-year long promotion by the Australian political establishment and media of militarist and nationalist propaganda. Extravaganzas are marking all the major events during the 1914-1918 war. This celebration seeks to conceal the real motivations for the war, which was a bloody imperialist slaughter, through which each of the major and minor powers, among them Australia, sought greater control of markets, colonies and spheres of influence.

As Shorten’s comments demonstrate, this campaign is being driven by the militarist ambitions of the Australian ruling elite, which is seeking to glorify war in order to create the conditions in which another generation of workers and youth can be sent to fight and die for the interests of Australian imperialism.

This is taking place amid deepening military tensions and a growing threat of war in every region of the world. In its drive to ensure untrammelled global hegemony, the United States has ratcheted up tensions with Russia. Through its “pivot to Asia,” the Obama administration has sought to undermine China diplomatically and economically while preparing for war against it.

Behind the backs of the population, the Australian political establishment has placed the country on the front line of US war plans. Under agreements signed by the former Greens-backed Gillard Labor government in 2011, and continued under the Abbott government, US marines are being stationed in Darwin, while Australian air and naval bases have been opened up to American forces.

Significantly, Shorten also couched his visit to Iraq as a belated celebration of Australia Day, on January 26. Australia Day is not a military anniversary. It marks the 1788 landing of the British First Fleet at Sydney Cove and Britain’s colonisation of Australia. Shorten’s visit to Iraq is part of a broader attempt by the political establishment in recent years to imbue Australia Day, and all official national celebrations, with an overtly militarist tone.

Labor has been the principal war party of the Australian ruling class, extending back to the wartime Labor government during WWI. Labor’s Andrew Fisher declared that Australia would fight to the “last

man and the last shilling” in defence of the British Empire. Labor was also brought to office during WWII.

The Hawke Labor government was among the first in the world to join the US-led coalition in the 1990-91 Gulf War against Iraq. In opposition, the Labor Party backed the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and initially offered purely tactical opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq on the grounds that it lacked the fig-leaf of UN approval. Once the war began, Labor’s token opposition was dropped, on the basis that it had to “support the troops.”

From the outset of the latest military intervention in the Middle East, Labor has marched in lockstep with the Abbott government. As well as giving unequivocal support to the war, it has backed the government’s attempts, supported by the media, to whip up an atmosphere of “national crisis” through a series of terrorist scares. Since September, Labor has helped pass three tranches of anti-democratic “anti-terror” legislation, which is directed ultimately against any opposition in the working class to the bipartisan agenda of war and austerity.



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