

Canadian prime minister praises troops as military clashes escalate in Iraq

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In the wake of the revelation that Canadian special forces had engaged Islamic State fighters in a gun battle, further exchanges of fire have taken place on two separate occasions.

Last Monday, at a military briefing on the progress of the mission in Iraq, officials also noted that Canadian CF18 jets had intensified their bombardment of ISIS targets, striking 12 times within a week. Although they did not indicate how many of these attacks had been directed by Canadian ground troops, the military had confirmed the previous week that special forces were pinpointing targets from the ground with lasers during air attacks.

The growing involvement of Canada's armed forces in ground combat makes a mockery of the Conservative government's claim that the six-month deployment to the US-led Mideast war, authorised in early October, is purely a training and assistance mission to support the Iraqi army and Kurdish militias. On the contrary, it appears ever more likely that it will be the prelude to a broader deployment of Canadian ground troops in alliance with US imperialism.

Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper responded to the latest developments by claiming that the military's actions were in keeping with the goals of the original mission. Answering criticism that Canada's military was spending more time at the frontline than the several thousand soldiers now in Iraq on "training" missions from other countries, he told the House of Commons on Wednesday, "I do not know what other militaries are doing, but I know that ours is doing exactly what parliament asked it to do, and that Canadians are behind it."

Other leading officials have been more explicit in pointing out that military operations in Iraq are entering a new stage. Paul Forget, the military official who

revealed the latest two cases of Canadian special forces returning fire, commented that such incidents could be expected to increase. "The role of our specialists was initially to show them some basic aspects. At this point we are in a position to advise them, assist them in a combat zone," he told reporters. The military has stated separately that Canadian troops are spending 20 percent of their time in Iraq on the front line of battle.

Although the Canadian special forces gun battles with ISIS are the only combat incidents involving Western forces in Iraq that have officially been recognised, a spokeswoman for the international coalition involved in the mission indicated that other countries may be doing more than is being publicly admitted. Questioned by the CBC as to why it was only Canadian troops who were involved in firefights, she responded that she could only comment on incidents that had been reported to the high command.

The special forces mission was initially scheduled to last six months when it was approved last October. On top of the growing number of combat incidents, there are further signs that an expansion of Canada's operation is already being prepared.

General Tom Lawson, chief of the Defence staff, travelled to Irbil last week for meetings with leading Kurdish regional officials. The defence department noted that his discussions included a meeting with the chancellor of the Kurdistan regional security council, Masrour Barzani. The department commented that the meeting was held "to exchange information, and update them on Canada's ongoing contribution to the advice and assist mission."

BasNews, a Kurdish media outlet based in the city, reported that Lawson was pressed by officials on the need for more Western assistance, including armoured vehicles and arms.

Another factor fuelling this speculation is that Ottawa continues to refuse all attempts to disclose the costs of Canada's Iraq mission. Defence Minister Rob Nicholson has said only that figures will be published three months after the conclusion of all operations.

The natural evolution of the mission as portrayed by the military top brass and defence politicians has been carefully prepared by the ruling class. From the outset, the deployment of Canadian air power and special forces in the Mideast war was a predatory move to assist Washington in the consolidation of its predominance in the region.

Harper is going all out to stir up the most reactionary and jingoistic Canadian nationalism over the conflict. Hailing the troops for their courageous role following the recent clashes, he declared that it was a "robust mission" and added, in the style of a military commander, "If those guys fire at us, we're going to fire back and we're going to kill them."

This marks a ratcheting up of the flag-waving nationalism and militarist propaganda that have characterised Harper's period in office. From the Libya intervention in 2011, to the investment of additional resources to upgrade the Canadian military and its deployment around the world, the Conservative government has sought to implement an aggressive foreign policy. This is being justified by the false portrayal of Canada historically as a democratic and peace-making power, expressed most cynically in Harper's speech on the anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War last August.

There is also a domestic component to this strategy. The Harper government is using the nationalist fervour whipped up over Iraq to enforce a further draconian assault on democratic rights. On Friday, it tabled its latest anti-terrorist bill, which grants even more wide-ranging powers to the intelligence services and gives police the right to detain people without charge for an extended period.

A right-wing nationalist campaign of militarism abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home is to be the Harper government's platform in the upcoming federal election due later this year. Since the twin attacks on armed forces personnel by disoriented individuals last October, Harper has sought to present Canada as a country under siege from terrorists so as to justify the continued build-up of state power and his

government's latest military intervention.

Any attempt to question this right-wing agenda is to be met with intimidation and the threat of repression. This was illustrated by the manner in which Harper responded to questions posed by the leader of the official opposition New Democrats (NDP), Thomas Mulcair on the Iraq mission. Mulcair stated that the recent clashes with ISIS were a breach of the original mission approved by parliament last October, accusing the Harper government of misleading Canadians.

Harper retorted, "I know that the opposition thinks it is a terrible thing that we are standing up to the jihadists. I know they think it is a terrible thing that some of these jihadists got killed when they fired on the Canadian military."

The equating of even the most limited questioning of the government's course with support for the terrorism of ISIS has ominous implications. Under Canada's anti-democratic terrorist laws, supporting a terrorist group is a criminal offence punishable by a long prison term. The technique of associating political opponents with Islamic fundamentalists has been employed by Harper previously, labelling former NDP leader Jack Layton as "Taliban Jack" for his advocacy of talks with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The reality is that the NDP, and the opposition Liberals, are in full agreement with the turn by Canada to a more aggressive foreign policy. Despite voting in opposition to the Iraq deployment last October, the NDP and Liberals both supported a so-called humanitarian mission to the region, as well as sending arms to the Kurds.

The NDP's true position was clearly indicated by the remarks of Paul Dewar, the party's foreign affairs spokesman, who said of the exchange with Harper and other government officials in parliament, "This isn't about who can say that they support the troops more than the other."



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