

Canadian government seizes on first Iraq casualty to press for war

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The death last week of Canadian Special Forces Sgt. Andrew Doiron provides further proof of Ottawa's growing involvement in ground combat operations in Iraq, in spite of official claims that Canadian troops are there merely to train and advise local forces.

Canada's first fatality in its six-month deployment, which commenced last October, occurred in a "friendly fire" incident, according to official accounts. A group of Special Forces personnel had just returned with their Kurdish peshmerga trainees from the front line and were apparently involved in a mix-up in the dark near an observation post. Three of Doiron's colleagues were seriously injured in the incident and are recovering in hospital.

The official Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) press release announcing the death went out of its way to suggest that the soldiers were a long way from the front lines when the incident took place. Such efforts in damage control are driven by the awareness that Canada's involvement in ground combat in another colonial-style counter-insurgency war is opposed by the overwhelming majority of the population.

Later reports revealed that the checkpoint in question was in fact just 200 meters from the front line. Kurdish media reported that the Canadian troops had shown up unannounced on the front line to call in coalition air strikes, a claim Ottawa has disputed. It contends that the CAF forces came under fire after being given clearance to proceed towards the checkpoint.

Already in January, it emerged that on more than two occasions, Canadian forces had engaged ISIS militants in gun battles and that the CAF Special Forces personnel are spending at least 20 percent of their time on the front lines, where they are directing air strikes by US coalition forces, including Canadian CF-18 fighters, and planning attacks by Kurdish militia.

Yet when parliament had debated a motion approving the mission last fall, the government insisted that Canada would have "no boots on the ground" in Iraq and no CAF personnel would be involved in ground combat operations.

Along with 69 Special Forces deployed to northern Iraq to work with the Kurdish peshmerga, Ottawa has contributed nine aircraft to the US-led bombing campaign of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) targets in Iraq and Syria. Six CF-18 fighter jets are striking ISIS positions in Iraq, while two Canadian reconnaissance aircraft and a refuelling plane are assisting the bombing raids.

The Conservative government has seized on Doiron's death to increase its propaganda in favour of a prolongation and major expansion of Canada's participation in the new US-led Mideast war.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in a statement supposedly to express his regret over the first Canadian fatality in Iraq, concentrated instead on exploiting the event to encourage support for a wider intervention.

"Almost daily we see new evidence of the violent threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL: ISIS's alternate name). More than ever, it is imperative that we, along with the more than sixty countries in the coalition, continue the campaign to halt ISIL's spread and reduce its capacity to carry out terrorist attacks abroad and here in Canada," declared Harper.

Continuing in this vein, he asserted, "We are proud to do our part and grateful to the men and women to whom it falls to carry out our commitment to peace and security."

The claim that Canadian and coalition forces are in Iraq to bring peace is a gross lie. Their engagement is just the latest in a long line of wars and aggressive interventions mounted by Washington and its allies in the Middle East. The underlying goal of the US and its Canadian junior partners is to maintain US hegemony in the world's most important oil-exporting region against their geopolitical rivals, above all Russia and China. Though ISIS has served as the initial pretext, the war is ultimately aimed at ousting the Syrian regime of Bashar-al Assad, a close ally of Iran and Russia, and replacing it with one subservient to Washington.

The current six-month CAF mission to Iraq is due to end at the beginning of April. Under these conditions, Harper's remarks were an unmistakable sign that the operation will

soon be extended.

This was the message Harper conveyed to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi in a telephone call on Monday. According to his web site, Harper stressed the critical role of CAF personnel in Iraq and reassured Al-Abadi of Ottawa's ongoing commitment to the international coalition against ISIS.

Earlier this month, Foreign Minister Rob Nicholson travelled to Iraq to meet with Iraqi government officials and visit the Special Forces troops in the north. In comments to journalists, he all but admitted that Canadian troops would remain in the country after the end of the six month period, stating, "Our mandate is until April 7, but we've indicated that Canada is not a country that stands on the sidelines, and we're looking at ways that we have contributed and what is available for the future."

According to a report in the right-wing *National Post*, senior military officials are merely waiting for the go-ahead from the government to lengthen the mission and expand the number of Special Forces personnel on the ground. Military sources told the newspaper that the initial deployment of forces had been able to establish the logistical and medical facilities in the region that would be required for a much larger military deployment.

A separate report in the *Ottawa Citizen* noted that military officers were fully expecting the government to make such an announcement. The report also strongly suggested that in extending the mission the government will expand it to include ground combat operations, not just training and advice to the Kurdish militias. As Colonel Steve Day, a former commander of Joint Task Force II, the elite Special Forces' unit that is leading the current mission, told the newspaper, "I would like to see the Canadian Special Forces, the western special forces augment the number of guys on the ground and get on the offensive by manhunting. I mean going after the leadership, the financiers, the logistic know-its, and taking apart the network."

These comments correspond with the policy of Washington, which already has 3000 military personnel involved in "training" the Iraqi army and anti-Assad "rebels" and is now planning for the Pentagon to take a more direct role in offensive operations against ISIS, specifically in the upcoming push to retake the city of Mosul. Iraq's second largest city, Mosul has been under ISIS control since last June.

The intensification of military aggression in Iraq and Syria will only deepen the ethnic, national and religious tensions that threaten to trigger a much broader conflict. The imperialist assaults on countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia over the past quarter-century have produced chaos, killing hundreds of thousands, displacing

millions, and tearing asunder entire societies.

Canada, under both Liberal and Conservative governments, has played a major role in this, taking a prominent role in the 1991 Gulf War, the Afghan war, and the bombardment of Libya in 2011.

A recent statement from Canada's Defence Ministry ruling out speculation, prompted by a comment by Defence Minister Jason Kenney, that Ottawa might deploy CAF personnel to Libya points both to the breadth of Canada's military engagement in the Middle East and the disaster imperialism has wrought in the region. Four years after a purported mission mounted in the name of establishing peace and democracy, Libya is a country in ruins, with rival Islamist militias—the erstwhile allies of Canada and the US—engaged in a brutal power struggle.

The latest developments in the Iraq mission also serve to underline the utterly fraudulent character of the professed opposition of Liberals and the trade union-based New Democratic Party (NDP) to the CAF's Iraq mission. The mild criticism from NDP spokespeople directed towards the government has focused almost entirely on the dishonesty of the Conservatives last fall when they claimed that Canadian forces would not be involved in combat missions.

The NDP, as it has repeatedly declared, supports the aims of the US coalition—the shoring up of US hegemony over the Middle East and western-orchestrated "regime change" in Syria.

Beholden to Canada's imperialist ruling elite, the social democrats will not expose how this latest war emerges out of the crimes of the western powers in the region or the predatory interests that are driving Canada's ever-deepening role in imperialist wars and aggression around the world.



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