

Canada's parliament approves major expansion of Mideast war

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By a 142-129 vote Monday evening, Canada's House of Commons endorsed the Conservative government's decision to extend and expand Ottawa's participation in the new US-led Mideast war.

Canadian Special Forces are now slated to remain in Iraq for an additional 12 months, until April 2016, providing "advice and assist" support to Kurdish militias battling the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). And Canadian CF-8 fighter jets will expand the scope of their air strikes targeting ISIS positions in Syria as well as Iraq.

Reports yesterday suggested that Canadian CF-18 bombers could be in action over Syria in a matter of days.

The vote followed two days of debate on a motion presented by Prime Minister Stephen Harper last week. After the vote Harper reiterated his claim that the military intervention is needed to counter Islamist terrorism in both the Middle East and Canada. "We cannot stand on the sidelines," declared Harper, "while ISIL [another acronym for ISIS] continues to promote terrorism in Canada as well as against our allies and partners. Nor can we allow ISIL to have a safe haven in Syria."

The reality is that the expansion of Canadian military operations into Syria marks a major escalation of the drive by Washington and its allies to carry out regime change in Damascus. The move is being taken without the consent of the government of Bashar al-Assad, a violation of international law that is tantamount to a declaration of war.

The fact that the US-led, Canadian-supported military campaign is aimed at the Assad regime, a close ally of Iran and Russia, was underscored by comments made by British Foreign Minister Phillip Hammond during a trip to Toronto last Friday. After welcoming the Harper government's decision to join the Syrian air campaign, Hammond expressed regret over the British parliament's vote against air strikes in Syria in September 2013. At that time, Washington and its allies were drawing up plans for

a direct military strike on the Assad regime, following fabricated claims it was responsible for a poison gas attack near the Syrian capital.

Yet for Hammond, the mission's ultimate goal remains the same. "We're delighted that others are able to do the lift in Syria that is equally required," Hammond concluded.

In the parliamentary debate over Harper's motion, the Conservatives sought to cloak the predatory aims of US and Canadian imperialism by cynically claiming to be coming to the rescue of innocents. "If the responsibility to protect means anything," said Defence Minister Jason Kenny, "... does it not mean in an instance such as this, preventing genocide, preventing ethnic cleansing, preventing sexual slavery of women and preventing the execution of gay men by throwing them off towers?"

This is brazen hypocrisy coming from a government which boasts about its close ties with the authoritarian regimes in Saudi Arabia and Egypt and with the expansionist Israeli state, and which similarly justified its participation in the NATO regime change war in Libya on the basis of a "responsibility to protect" civilians. That war saw the US and its allies use Islamists as their proxies, throwing Libya into sectarian chaos. Indeed, as the *Ottawa Citizen* recently revealed, Canadian military personnel openly joked about acting as "al-Qaeda's air force" in Libya. Subsequently, the CIA encouraged many of these Islamists to travel to Syria, where many of them joined other fighters armed by the Saudis, Qatar and other US Persian Gulf client states in forming ISIS.

The "responsibility to protect" doctrine has become the central pretext for a series of aggressive imperialist operations that have wrought death and destruction on the countries unfortunate enough to be chosen for such "rescue" missions. The Canadian ruling elite was heavily involved in the development of this doctrine, which emerged from a 2001 international commission that was

funded by the then Liberal government of Jean Chretien and in which Michael Ignatieff, a subsequent federal Liberal Party leader, played a prominent role.

Canada is the only western country, apart from the United States, participating in the bombing operations in Syria. This development again illustrates Ottawa's role as a pivotal frontline partner in the US drive to maintain its hegemonic position in the Middle East, the world's most important oil-exporting region, and beyond. Canada has also taken a leading position in the provocations against Russia over Ukraine, facilitating the supply of weaponry to the Ukrainian army and voluntary militias, while sending troops and aircraft to Eastern Europe and the Baltic as part of NATO's military buildup.

The Conservatives' expanded Mideast war also has an important domestic political function. As elections approach, the Harper government is preparing the most right-wing election campaign in modern Canadian history, seeking to use the purported threat of "jihadi terror" to deflect attention from the rapidly deteriorating economic situation and to whip up reaction.

Canada's war in Syria and Iraq, which is now guaranteed to run well beyond the election, is to be used to whip up bellicose nationalism and to make scarcely veiled appeals to anti-Muslim prejudice. As part of this, the government will label all of the opposition parties as being soft on terror at home and abroad for their unwillingness to back the extension and expansion of military operations in Middle East and their refusal to unreservedly endorse the government's legislation to dramatically expand the powers and reach of the national-security apparatus, Bill C-51.

The rejection of the government motion by the opposition parties in parliament in no way represents a fundamental repudiation of aggressive militarism as a means of securing Canada's imperialist interests. If anything, the two days of parliamentary debate saw both the New Democrats and Liberals signal their support for military operations in the Middle East more openly than ever.

Although voting against the motion, the official opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) presented an amendment to the government's motion that accepted the presence of Canadian military personnel in Iraq so as to assist in the supply of anti-ISIS forces. Party leader Thomas Mulcair went out of his way to emphasize the NDP's willingness to back military aggression if backed by the UN or NATO, pointing to the 2011 war in Libya as an example. On Syria, his primary concern was not that

the government is acting illegally under international law. Instead, he attacked the Conservatives from the right, claiming that the bombing of ISIS would strengthen the Assad regime—an implicit call for a more direct intervention against Damascus.

The Liberals also voted against the motion. But party leader Justin Trudeau made clear that his party supports expanding the Canadian Armed Forces training mission in Iraq by deploying more Canadian Special Forces personnel there. Special Forces personnel are already on the frontlines, where they have been siting ISIS targets for bombing.

With Trudeau's approval, former Liberal Justice Minister and elder statesmen Irwin Cotler abstained in Monday evening's vote. Declaring his adherence to the "responsibility to protect doctrine," Cotler criticized the government, as he did last October, for failing to advocate a regime change war to overthrow Assad. "I remain unable to support the government in this matter," said Cotler, "because ... Canada's mission continues to allow Assad to assault Syrian civilians with impunity."

Quebec Premier Phillippe Couillard and his Quebec Liberal Party, which operates as a separate party from the federal Liberals, has, for its part, declared its support for the Conservative government's war plans.

Both Green Party MPs, leader Elizabeth May and Bruce Hyer, voted against Harper's motion. This marked a shift from the initial vote authorizing the mission last October, when Hyer gave his support to the Harper government's deployment. May's criticism of the expansion of the war into Syria was along the same lines as the NDP, attacking Harper for allegedly lending support to Assad. "We do not want to admit that if we are successful in Syria, we will have made Bashar al-Assad secure by removing a dreadful force that also happens to be against him," commented May.

The Bloc Quebecois, the federal sister party to the pro-separatist Parti Quebecois, released a statement declaring that it would only back a mission that had international legitimacy. It called for support for a UN-authorized intervention to defeat ISIS.



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