

NDP opposes Canada's role in Mideast war on tactical grounds

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The recent parliamentary debate over Canada's expanded participation in the latest US-led war in the Middle East has once again demonstrated that the official opposition New Democrats (NDP) are a pro-imperialist party.

Although the trade union-backed NDP voted against the plans of Stephen Harper's Conservative government to extend Ottawa's participation in the Mideast war for a further 12 months and to expand airstrikes to Syria, its differences with the government are of a tactical rather than principled character. In both the speeches of party leader Thomas Mulcair and an amendment tabled by the NDP to the government's parliamentary motion on Canada's Mideast military intervention, the party went out of its way to conceal the imperialist aims of the war and advance a policy that would see Ottawa continue to play a prominent role in assisting the US.

The government motion was passed by 142 votes to 129 on March 30. The airstrikes involving six CF-18 fighter jets are to be expanded from Iraq to Syria, without the consent of the Assad regime in Damascus. Under international law such a move is tantamount to an act of war. It is a major step toward Canada's participation in a "regime war" in Syria—something Obama has told the US's Mideast war allies will be the next order of business once the Islamic State is degraded and contained.

The NDP's amendment in no way challenged the Conservative government's false narrative on the new Canadian-backed, US-led war in the Middle East, which presents it as a humanitarian mission, not the continuation of Washington's drive to shore up its hegemony over the world's most important oil-exporting region.

The NDP accepted as good coin the opening lines of the government's motion, which portrayed the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS or ISIL) as an inexplicable evil that is wreaking havoc on the region and posing an imminent threat to Canada. The motion began: "(i) the terrorist group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has repeatedly called on its members to target Canada and Canadians at home and abroad; (ii) ISIL poses a clear and active threat to the people of the Middle East, including members of vulnerable religious and ethnic minority groups who have been subjected to a brutal and barbaric campaign of sexual violence, murder, and intimidation

by ISIL."

What is conveniently left out is the critical role played by the US and the other imperialist powers, including Canada, in creating the conditions under which ISIS and other armed Islamist groups could emerge as contenders for power in Iraq and Syria.

It says nothing about the illegal US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was based on fraudulent claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and wrought mayhem and destruction, or about Washington's subsequent fanning of sectarian tensions in Iraq as part of a "divide and rule" strategy. It is similarly silent on the support the US and its Middle East allies like Saudi Arabia and Qatar have lent Islamist militias in Syria as part of their efforts to overthrow Assad, a close ally of Iran and Russia. Nor does it make any mention of how the Islamist forces the US and Canada used as their proxies in overthrowing the Gaddafi regime in Libya were later encouraged by the CIA to redeploy to Syria, with many ultimately joining ISIS.

As for the claim that ISIS is targeting Canadians, this has been systematically hyped by the government, with Harper and his ministers claiming, without a shred of evidence, that this played a role in last October's killings of two members of the Canadian Armed Forces, so as to whip up support for Canada's participation in the war in Iraq and now Syria. It has also served as a pretext for sweeping new attacks on democratic rights in the form of the government's draconian Bill C-51.

The reason for the NDP's acquiescence to the government's campaign becomes clear with its alternative proposals for the mission. The NDP amendment suggests that it is necessary to "work with our allies in the region to stabilize neighbouring countries, strengthen political institutions and assist these countries in coping with an influx of refugees."

Just who are Canada's "allies" in the region? A collection of US-backed, despotic, dictatorial regimes, many of which have long patronized extreme Islamists and are helping promote sectarian Sunni-Shia conflict across the region. They include the Saudi monarchy, which is leading a coalition of Sunni Arab states in the bombardment of Yemen in an attempt to displace Iranian-backed Houthi rebels who have seized power from the US-supported president. Egypt, once again under military

dictatorship, is another of Canada's longstanding Mideast allies. So too are the smaller Gulf sheikhdoms that have all made their own contributions to the bombardment of targets in Iraq and Syria.

This is the cabal of reactionary, US-sponsored regimes that the NDP would like to work with in the name of providing "humanitarian assistance," political stability and combatting extremism.

The NDP's invocation of "our allies in the region" also reflects the party's essential agreement with the strategy of US imperialism to consolidate its geostrategic interests in the Middle East. This was made clear by party leader Thomas Mulcair in his initial response to Harper's announcement of a prolonged and expanded Mideast deployment, when he sought to cover up the imperialist interests driving the US-led intervention in the region by denouncing the Canadian government for having "no plan."

The NDP's amendment, it should be noted, left the way open for Canadian military operations to continue. It urged the "end of participation of Canadian Forces troops in combat, airstrikes and advice-and-assist training in Iraq and Syria as soon as possible." Since the NDP accepts the imperialist narrative of a struggle against extremism, the formulation "as soon as possible" could easily be reinterpreted to justify an open-ended deployment.

Moreover, while opposing a Canadian Mideast "combat" or "training" mission, the NDP says it does favor Canadian troops being involved in supplying arms to the local militias and Iraqi government forces battling ISIS. Canada should "contribute to the fight against ISIL, including military support for the transportation of weapons," declared the NDP amendment.

In practical terms this could well lead to direct Canadian involvement in combat. If Canada is supplying weapons to Kurdish militias on the front line battling ISIS fighters or the Iraqi army engaged in an offensive to retake ISIS-held territory, it would presumably be justified under the NDP's proposal to bomb ISIS targets to facilitate the delivery of such supplies, or, much like the Special Forces are doing under the guise of "advising and assisting" local forces, to exchange fire with the enemy.

The NDP's open and unequivocal support for the pursuit of Canadian imperialism's interests in the Middle East, in alliance with the aggressive drive of the Obama administration to maintain US hegemony in the region, should come as no surprise. As well as its support for the 2011 Libyan war, the NDP has supported Ottawa's aggressive anti-Russian campaign over Ukraine, which has involved a massive US-led military build-up in the Baltic and in Eastern Europe, including the deployment of Canadian troops, ships and air power.

The NDP has also reaffirmed its readiness to support military missions authorized by the United Nations, one of the principal institutions through which the imperialist powers assert their global interests, and NATO, the most important US-led military

alliance. In his speech responding to the Harper government's war plans, Mulcair claimed, "UN missions and NATO missions are the kinds of internationally sanctioned campaigns that New Democrats can and have been able to get behind."

As Mulcair made clear by referring to the NDP's support for the NATO 2011 Libya war, the NDP is fully prepared to use bogus claims of international legitimacy to give its unreserved backing to aggressive imperialist interventions around the world. Its support for the NATO-led bombardment of Libya, which led to the deaths of tens of thousands and strengthened radical Islamist forces, was critical in selling the war to an overwhelmingly skeptical Canadian public as a "humanitarian" mission to save the Libyan people from slaughter. Canada played a major role in the Libya regime-change war. Canadian warplanes flew more than 1,500 sorties and a Canadian general had overall command of the NATO air war.

Canada's prominent involvement in US-led military aggression has continued into the current war, with the six CF-18 fighter jets reportedly flying more than 10 percent of total coalition bombing raids. With Wednesday's airstrikes on ISIS positions in Raqqa, Canada became the only western country other than the US to take part in combat in Syria.

When Harper announced the government's plan to have Canada mount military action in Syria, the NDP's primary point of attack was from the standpoint that this would strengthen Assad, implicitly lending the NDP's support to the imperialist powers' ultimate goal of regime change in Damascus.

When Mulcair finally got round to raising the issue of the mission's legality in the final stages of the debate on the Conservative war motion, he posed as a defender of the sanctity of international law. Coming from the leader of a party which backed the murderous assault of the Israeli armed forces against the defenceless civilian population of Gaza last summer, such claims possess a thoroughly dishonest and hollow character.



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