

Harper visits Iraq to laud Canada's role in Mideast war

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In a previously unannounced trip, Prime Minister Stephen Harper last weekend visited Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) Special Forces troops based in northern Iraq and air force personnel in Kuwait.

Harper used the trip to promote Canada's expanding role in the new US-led war in the Middle East and his government's push to dramatically expand the powers of the national-security apparatus at home—falsely portraying both as necessary responses to Islamic terrorism.

In separate meetings with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi and Masoud Barzani, the president of the autonomous Kurdish region, Harper reaffirmed the Conservative government's commitment to continued military action in the country and in neighbouring Syria.

Harper sought to cast the military intervention as a humanitarian mission aimed at protecting the civilian population from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). He announced modest sums of aid, totaling some \$160 million, to assist reconstruction in Iraq and help several other Middle Eastern countries deal with the massive influx of Syrian refugees.

Reviewing the trip, Harper commented, "Most importantly, I got to convey my personal thanks to Canadian troops for helping protect our own citizens as well as innocent children, women and men in the region from the barbaric actions of ISIS."

In reality, the war is a dirty imperialist enterprise, which arises out of the series of wars the US has mounted since 2003 to maintain strategic dominance over the world's most important oil-exporting region. While ISIS has served as the pretext for the return of US and other western troops to Iraq, the ultimate goal of Washington and its Mideast allies, like Saudi Arabia and Turkey, is the replacement of the Assad regime in Damascus, which is closely allied with Iran and Russia, by one more pliant to US interests.

In line with its fulsome support for US imperialist

aggression around the globe, Canada has committed 69 Special Forces troops to training and advising Kurdish fighters in northern Iraq, and six CF-18 fighter jets, two surveillance aircraft, and a refuel-plane, supported by some 600 CAF personnel, to assist coalition bombing missions.

In late March, the government extended Canada's military mission in the Middle East until April 2016 and authorized the CAF to join bombing runs in Syria, making Canada the only one of the US's western allies to attack Syria. Bombing Syria is a flagrant violation of international law and tantamount to a declaration of war on Syria's government.

To date, CAF planes have flown more than 800 sorties over Iraq and Syria, with well over 500 of these CF-18 bombing missions.

Initially, the claim was made that ground troops in Iraq were engaged in a "non-combat" mission, and that they would merely be training and advising Kurdish militiamen behind the front lines. But within months, it was revealed that Canadian troops were making regular trips to the front to direct attacks against ISIS positions and call in air strikes by coalition aircraft. In January, the Canadian military acknowledged that around 20 percent of the time, the Special Forces troops are at the front.

This issue emerged during Harper's trip due to the death in March of Sergeant Andrew Doiron as a result of a mix-up with Kurdish forces. Doiron and a group of Canadian soldiers were allegedly mistaken for ISIS fighters by a frontline Kurdish post, resulting in his fatal shooting.

With investigations still ongoing, Harper attempted to downplay the significance of the incident, while covering up the true character of the Canadian army's operations in the region. "Look, this was a terrible tragedy. We will get the facts, but let it not obscure, frankly, the respect I think we should have for the Kurdish fighters in this area," said

Harper.

The Canadian prime minister's unwillingness to apportion blame for the incident is part of ongoing attempts to smooth over tensions between Canadian and Kurdish forces, which, in the immediate aftermath of the fatal shooting, offered differing accounts of the circumstances surrounding it.

Canada's involvement in the latest Mideast war is being driven by economic as well as geopolitical considerations. In recent years, Iraq has emerged as a major trading partner for Canada, with bilateral trade in 2012 totaling more than \$4 billion, making it one of Canada's largest trade partners in the Middle East. Moreover, Iraq is viewed as offering major growth opportunities for Canadian oil and infrastructure companies.

In recognition of this, the Conservative government last year named Iraq one of Canada's "development partners." This designation allows Baghdad to receive additional financial aid and other support from the Canadian government.

The Kurdish region is one of the most lucrative parts of the country for Canadian investment. Several oil companies and other businesses have operations there, and the Harper government opened a trade office in the regional capital, Irbil, last year. The office is responsible for expanding Canadian investment throughout Iraq, and was promoted by the government at the time as necessary because the Iraqi economy was one of the fastest growing in the world.

While in Irbil, Harper took time to visit the Irbil office of Melwood Geometrix, a Montreal-based company that specializes in making prefabricated concrete.

Media commentators noted the campaign-style character of this and many of Harper's other appearances in Iraq and Kuwait. His meeting with the local Melwood Geometrix manager took place in front of running cameras, and after a greeting, Harper was handed a Montreal *Canadiens* hockey jersey.

During his stop in Kuwait, Harper cultivated the image of a wartime prime minister with appeals to Canadian nationalism and militarism. An article on the *IPolitics* website described the scene when Harper addressed air force personnel in Kuwait as follows, "In front of him, dressed in combat fatigues, stood the pilots and support crews deployed there for the Canadian mission against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Behind him were two CF18s parked at diagonal angles, and between them was a large Canadian flag."

Although it remains unclear if the Conservatives will

call an early election, it is beyond question that whether the vote takes place this spring or next October, they will mount an extreme rightwing campaign, whipping up bellicose Canadian nationalism and appealing to anti-Muslim sentiment.

Harper has already served notice that he intends to portray the opposition parties as "soft" on terrorism, because they have not fully endorsed the CAF combat mission in the Middle East and said that if elected to office, they will amend Bill C-51, the Conservatives' legislation giving sweeping new powers to the national security apparatus. These new powers include authorizing the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) to break virtually any law in disrupting what it deems threats to Canada's national and economic security or territorial integrity, and giving state agencies unfettered access to all government information on individuals named in national security investigations.

Whilst on his whirlwind Middle East tour, Harper went out of the way to put in a plug for Bill C-51. Said Harper, "We're working to give our security agencies the whole range of modern tools necessary to identify terrorists and to thwart their plans, including greater ability to stem the recruitment and the flow of home-grown fighters."

Within hours of Harper leaving the Middle East, a lengthy exposé appeared in the Montreal daily *La presse* that sheds light on the true, neo-colonial character of the Canadian military's ever-growing list of foreign interventions. *La presse* revealed that over a two-month period between December 2010 and January 2011, CAF military police physically abused and psychologically tortured 40 Afghan detainees in an attempt to coerce information from them. Heavily-armed military police repeatedly invaded the cells where the detainees were being held, forced them to the ground and against walls, and otherwise threatened and abused them in an effort to terrorize them. After a complaint was made, the military authorities were compelled to investigate but hushed up the entire affair, with no one involved subject to any disciplinary action whatsoever.



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