

Canadian prime minister proposes ban on travel to areas under “terrorist” control

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In a speech in Ottawa last week, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper declared that a new Conservative government would ban all travel to zones controlled by “terrorist” groups. Any exceptions permitted to the blanket ban would be determined by the government, and would include those carrying out humanitarian work, journalist activities or diplomatic missions.

The announcement represents a major threat to basic democratic rights. The proposal would abandon the presumption of innocence, with the responsibility being placed on the individual to prove that they had a government-approved reason for travelling to a designated zone. “There are very few legitimate reasons to go to places like these,” Harper proclaimed. “And those who go without such legitimate reasons will face the full force of the law.”

The new law would enable the government, which has a long list of organizations it deems to be “terrorist,” to outlaw travel to any part of the world. As an editorial in the *Globe and Mail*, which dismissed the significance of the attack on democratic rights, was compelled to acknowledge, “Would a future government ban travel to, say, Gaza? Or Somalia?” To this could be added areas of Turkey where the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) has influence, or Lebanon, where Hezbollah is active.

The legislative proposal has been inspired by a similar measure passed in Australia last year granting Canberra the power to designate any area in the world a no-go zone. The punishment for those charged for travelling to a banned location is up to 10 years in prison.

Harper was suitably vague in specifying the target of such legislation, stating that the ban would apply to “the most dangerous places on Earth where governance is nonexistent and violence is widespread and brutal.”

The prime minister has been invoking the threat of terrorism for months as part of a right-wing campaign to undermine democratic rights at home and expand

aggressive military interventions abroad.

In his speech marking the start of the election campaign, Harper cultivated his image as a strong leader by emphasizing Canada’s recent military engagements. As well as pointing to the war in Syria and Iraq, he rebuked Russian President Vladimir Putin for his alleged aggression in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, and boasted of Canada’s firm military response in conjunction with its NATO allies.

Harper’s aggressive posture is aimed at convincing big business that he is the candidate most capable of ruthlessly upholding its interests on the global stage. At the same time, his latest policy initiative is tailored to appeal to the most backward social layers on the basis of Canadian nationalism and a reactionary anti-Muslim pitch.

The travel ban proposal would involve the government relying on national security agencies like the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) and Canada’s signals intelligence agency (CSE) to gather information on Canadians travelling to the designated zones. These organizations are not only complicit in vast spying programmes directed against the Canadian population, but have systematically violated the law and the human rights of Canadian citizens.

Since the onset of the war on terror in the aftermath of 9/11, CSIS has been implicated in providing information to authoritarian regimes in the Middle East as part of Canada’s own rendition programme, resulting in the torture of Maher Arar and other individuals. CSE has closely collaborated with its partners in the “Five Eyes,” the United States, New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom, to spy on the world’s population and provide information to assist in US-led wars.

The undermining of the presumption of innocence is in keeping with the Conservatives’ latest anti-terrorism act, Bill C-51. The vast array of draconian measures contained

within it include an all-embracing definition of national security risks which permits intelligence agencies to actively intervene against everything from potential threats to economic stability to territorial integrity and dangers to the constitutional order.

Bill C-51 also establishes a new offence of promoting terrorism, lengthens the period of time terrorist suspects can be detained without charge and grants permission to CSIS agents to break the law with the approval of secret courts.

While legitimizing the destruction of democratic rights at home, and serving to divert attention away from Canada's deepening economic crisis, the invocation of the terrorist threat has served as the pretext for a dramatic intensification of Canadian military operations abroad. Harper therefore continued to focus on the anti-terrorist theme on Monday to argue in favour of Ottawa's ongoing military intervention in alliance with US imperialism in Iraq and Syria.

Harper presented the US-led coalition, which includes France, Britain and several Arab states, as acting out of humanitarian concerns. "We felt we had no choice. We were witnessing mass slaughter at an alarming, lightning pace that was sweeping across the region," he said in a speech.

The reality is that Canada has aligned itself with the US drive to secure its hegemony in the Middle East against its geopolitical rivals, above all Russia and China. The recent announcement by President Obama that the US would target anyone who posed a threat to the small band of US-trained fighters in Syria, including the Assad regime, confirms what has been clear all along: the main goal of the Mideast war is regime change in Damascus.

In his predictable style, Harper used the travel ban announcement to paint the other parties as soft on terrorism. Their pledges to provide humanitarian aid to the region amounted to "dropping aid on dead people," he declared, if not combined with military force.

In truth, the differences expressed by the opposition parties over the conduct of the Mideast war are of a tactical character. The New Democratic Party (NDP) voted against the extension of the military mission for a further 12 months in March and its expansion in to Syria. However, it presented an alternative proposal that would have seen Canadian troops remain in the region on "humanitarian" grounds and to supply local proxy forces with weapons.

Liberal leader Justin Trudeau has committed his party to expanding the presence of Canadian Special Forces in

Iraq to train Iraqi forces.

Both opposition parties are also fully on board with the strategic goal of the intervention, which is to secure Washington's geostrategic dominance in the world's most important oil-producing region.

NDP leader Thomas Mulcair provided his stamp of approval to Harper's latest anti-democratic proposal, and vowed that his party would back it. "It won't make a big difference practically speaking," Mulcair said Sunday. "But we're not going to be against something that, theoretically at least, could help combat terrorism."

His full embrace of the reactionary war on terror framework exposes the fraudulent character of the NDP's pose as an opponent of Bill C-51. Since May, Mulcair has been proclaiming that a government under his leadership would repeal the law. This position was adopted solely for electoral considerations when the scale of opposition among the population to the Conservatives' assault on basic democratic rights became clear. It followed a three-month period in which Mulcair insisted that a government involving the NDP would not overturn the law, but amend it.

Mulcair has also made repeated overtures to the Liberals, declaring his readiness to form a coalition with a party which established the framework of Canada's authoritarian anti-terror laws and expanded the powers of the national security apparatus when it last held office. The Liberals voted in favour of Bill C-51, with Trudeau asserting that the party would amend it if it formed the next government.

Given this record, Trudeau's attempt to posture as a defender of democratic rights in opposition to Harper's latest proposal was grotesque. "Canada is a country that respects people's rights," he intoned. "And any time a government chooses to limit those rights, it has to be able to answer very direct and complete questions about why it's necessary, about how it will work, about what the clear plan is, and Mr. Harper has done none of that."



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