

Australia called on to join illegal US military operations in Syria

James Cogan
22 August 2015

The Australian government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott confirmed this week that it is considering a US request for Australian warplanes to expand their operations in Iraq over the border into Syria.

Australian military forces were sent back to the Middle East last September to assist Washington to prop up its puppet regime in Baghdad against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Six Australian F-18 Hornets, flying out of an airbase in the United Arab Emirates, conduct regular bombing missions against alleged ISIS targets. The fraudulent legal basis for the air campaign is an “invitation” from the Iraqi government.

Abbott told the media yesterday that a decision on joining US operations inside Syria would be made within “a couple of weeks.” He asserted: “While there is a little difference between the legalities of airstrikes on either side of the border, there is no difference in the morality. Whether it is operating in Iraq or Syria, it [ISIS] is an absolutely evil movement. And in the end, when they don’t respect the border, the question is why should we?”

Abbott proceeded to outline how the Australian air force is already directly facilitating US attacks inside Syria. A refuelling plane services American jets and a command and control aircraft coordinates air strikes, he stated. Defence Minister Kevin Andrews separately confirmed that Australian pilots are also “embedded” with an American unit that controls armed drone aircraft which carry out surveillance missions and targeted assassinations inside Syria.

The “little difference between the legalities” noted by Abbott is the fact that Australian operations inside Syria would be overtly illegal, as they would involve open repudiation of Syria’s national sovereignty. The Syrian government, along with Iran and Russia, has condemned the intervention by the US and its allies as a violation of international law.

Washington claimed the danger that ISIS posed to its

interests in Iraq as the pretext to intervene directly into the Syrian civil war. But the Obama administration has made clear that its ultimate aim is the ousting of the Iranian- and Russian-backed regime headed by President Bashar al-Assad, and the installation of a pro-US client state in Damascus.

Australia has a long history of participating in Washington’s criminal wars. In 2001, the conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard committed troops to the US invasion of Afghanistan. In 2003, the Howard government enlisted in the “coalition of the willing”—along with the US, United Kingdom and Poland—and took part in the illegal invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.

Nevertheless, under today’s increasingly fraught economic and geopolitical conditions, Abbott’s justification for illegal operations—that Australia has no obligation to respect national borders—has provoked warnings in establishment circles about the implications.

Don Rothwell, a professor of law at the Australian National University, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that the government was considering action that would “radically adjust Australian doctrine.”

Rothwell stated: “There is no [United Nations] Security Council resolution. Australia can’t exercise a right of ‘self-defence.’ And certainly the fact that the US has made an invitation is not sufficient.”

Attacks against ISIS inside Syria, Rothwell implied, would be tantamount to the assertion that Australia had the right to follow “terrorists into a state which is harbouring terrorists.” Such a claim could be invoked as the pretext for military operations against any country where the Australian state alleged that a “security threat” was present—without the permission of the targeted country’s government.

Rothwell warned that “taking such an approach might cause concern” in the Asian region. Indonesia, in

particular, is deeply sensitive to any suggestion by Australian imperialism that it has the right to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign countries.

The opposition Labor Party, which fully endorsed last year's deployment of military forces to Iraq, expressed similar concerns over the international reaction to Australian involvement in openly illegal operations in Syria. Labor leader Bill Shorten told journalists: "We will be seeking an explanation of the legal basis upon the proposition on which the United States has asked us. Is it legal, what the United States has asked us to do?"

There is little doubt that Labor will put aside its concerns and back Syrian operations if that is what Washington wants. As Shorten also stressed: "Labor always seeks to achieve bipartisanship on national security... we've been very constructive." Both Labor and the conservative parties are committed to unconditional fealty to the alliance with the United States, which is viewed as essential in pursuing interests of the Australian financial and corporate elite.

The questions over the legality of the US war inside Syria reflect a wider, unstated concern in Australian ruling circles about the quagmire generated by Washington's reckless and incoherent policies in the Middle East. The destruction that the US invasion wreaked on Iraq, followed by Washington's open stoking of civil war in Libya and Syria, has plunged the entire region into chaos, giving rise to phenomena such as ISIS, as well as the world's worst refugee crisis.

Under conditions in which Australia has enlisted as a key partner in the US military build-up in Asia and assisted it to stoke unprecedented military tensions with China, the prospect of the US becoming even more embroiled in the Middle East is cause for alarm. Washington, however, is determined to pursue its agenda for hegemony in the Middle East and internationally, regardless of the consequences, and is insisting its Australian ally join in.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact