Australian government commits to air strikes inside Syria

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The Australian government has cynically seized on the mass exodus of refugees from the Middle East to provide a humanitarian smokescreen for its decision to step up Australia's military involvement in the criminal US-led war in Iraq and Syria.

After a cabinet meeting yesterday, Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced that Australian war planes, currently involved in attacking Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) forces in Iraq, would carry out air strikes inside Syria. The same cabinet meeting decided to allow an additional 12,000 Syrian refugees into Australia and allocate $44 million to assist the millions of Syrian refugees living in squalid camps in the Middle East.

The hypocrisy behind these two decisions is breath-taking. Abbott's government, which is notorious for its brutal "turn back the boats" policy and the indefinite incarceration of asylum seekers in offshore detention centres, has lifted its refugee quota to take a nominal number of additional Syrians in a bid to intimidate and silence criticism of its escalating commitment to the illegal Middle Eastern war.

Writing in the *Australian* today, Attorney-General George Brandis tried to justify military engagement in Syria on the fraudulent basis of the "collective self-defence of Iraq." Having elicited a phony invitation from its client regime in Baghdad to intervene in Iraq, the US and its allies are exploiting this pretext for military interventions against ISIS inside Syria, in flagrant breach of that country's national sovereignty.

The main responsibility for the millions of people displaced from Syria, and also Iraq, lies with the US and its allies, including Australia, which destabilised the entire region through the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, and, from 2012, through the regime-change operation inside Syria to oust President Bashar al-Assad. Washington only turned on ISIS, funded and armed by its Persian Gulf allies, when its forces crossed into Iraq last year and threatened to topple the US-backed puppet regime in Baghdad.

The Abbott government's announcements have been supported virtually unanimously by the Australian media and political establishment. Murdoch's *Australian* editorialised today that the Australian response "strikes a balance" and hailed the bipartisan support of the opposition Labor Party and its leader Bill Shorten.

The so-called liberal Fairfax Media was just as supportive. An editorial in today's *Sydney Morning Herald* questioned the "legality, efficiency and potential consequences" of joining US-led air strikes against ISIS in Syria, but declared that the government "deserves credit for accepting, albeit belatedly, the moral imperative to welcome many more refugees from Syria." Commentator Tony Wright declared: "Cynicism deserves a rest day concerning the Abbott government's decision to grant a home to 12,000 people."

In a similar vein, Labor leader Shorten welcomed the Syrian refugee intake and backed expanded military action into Syria, saying only that it should be "constrained by the collective self defence of Iraq." He called for a parliamentary debate, not on committing Australian fighter jets to US operations inside Syria, but to discuss the long-term strategy of the war. The lack of even a token parliamentary vote once again underlines the anti-democratic manner in which these wars are being waged behind the backs of the population.

Shorten's reservations reflect concerns in ruling circles over the dangers of being dragged into another Middle Eastern quagmire.

Abbott ruled out, for the time being at least, any strikes against Syrian government forces inside Iraq, declaring: "This is not an attempt to build a liberal pluralist market democracy overnight in the Middle East." In a veiled reference to Iraq, he added: "This has been tried and it didn't magnificently succeed."

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Abbott nevertheless made clear his opposition to the Syrian government, saying: “Do we want Assad gone? Of course we do. Do our military operations contribute to that at this time? No, they don’t.” In other words, at a future time, the Abbott government could commit to attacking the Assad regime, should Washington make the call. Significantly, Abbott also refused to rule out a future commitment of Australian ground troops to the war inside Syria, commenting that it was “not appropriate to speculate today.”

Australian Strategic Policy Institute head Peter Jennings commented in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “My interpretation is that the PM understands and his cabinet understands that more needs to be done here. So this isn’t the end game... The sensible thing to do is not to close off options for what might have to happen in the future.”

This cautious approach reflects above all the contradictory and reckless character of US policy in the Middle East, which has created a catastrophe for the Syrian people. The US has not abandoned its efforts to oust Assad, but at the same time is seeking to reach an accommodation with the Iranian regime, an ally of Assad.

Australian foreign editor Greg Sheridan, who is well-connected in Washington, suggested that the US and its allies might consider a political solution that included Assad. “Western governments are undergoing an agonising reappraisal. If Assad is overthrown the new situation might be even worse, with nothing left but a civil war between Islamic State, Al Qaeda and various war lords.”

The significance of the Abbott government’s decision extends beyond Canberra and has been closely followed in the US and international media. While the size of the Australian military commitment is relatively small, Washington values Australia’s unalloyed political support as it seeks to hold together a disparate and shaky alliance for its war in Syria and Iraq.

Significantly, two former top-level US officials—former CIA director General David Petraeus and ex-deputy national security adviser Elliott Abrams—happened to be in Australia this week emphasising their support for Australian air strikes in Syria. Abrams had a private meeting with Abbott as well as a dinner with senior government and Liberal Party officials, to urge Australian involvement not only in attacking ISIS but in bringing down the Assad regime.

Petraeus, who addressed the Lowy Institute last week, praised Australia as “a treasured ally of the United States” and encouraged the Abbott government to engage ISIS “not just in Iraq, but in Syria as well.” He told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “7.30” program on Monday that Syria was “a geopolitical Chernobyl that is just spewing instability, violence and extremism.” As former commander of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, Petraeus is directly responsible for the social disaster across the entire region that led to the emergence of ISIS and other reactionary Islamist groups.

That the Abbott government felt the need to drum up a humanitarian pretext for air strikes in Syria demonstrates the wide gulf between the political establishment and wide layers of the population who are repulsed both by its callous treatment of refugees and its commitment to an escalating Middle Eastern war. That is also why the Greens are positioning themselves to function as a political safety valve for any opposition.

Greens leader Richard di Natale criticised the government’s decision, warning that it would make “a bad situation worse.” He added that “when you don’t have a clear plan… then what you do is commit Australian lives to a conflict that has no clear end game.”

In other words, like last year when the Abbott government committed military forces to the US war in Iraq, the Greens have no objection in principle. They are expressing tactical concerns about the incoherent character of US policy. Presumably, if the Obama administration could convince di Natale of the efficacy of the war, the Greens would provide fulsome support, as indeed the party has done for the Afghan occupation and the US military build-up in the Asia Pacific against China.

Workers and young people should reject the bogus humanitarian justification for ramping up a new war in the Middle East. Time and again, such campaigns have been concocted to disguise the predatory aims of the US and its allies, including the Kosovar refugee crisis that was the prelude to the NATO bombing of Serbia in the 1990s, and the militia violence in East Timor before the Australian military intervention. Washington has not the slightest concern for the humanitarian disaster in the Middle East that its policies have created. Rather, with Canberra’s support, the US is seeking to ensure its continued domination in this strategic, energy-rich region.

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