

Bloc Québécois hails Canada's role in Mideast war

Keith Jones
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The pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois (BQ) is trumpeting its support for Canada's leading role in the latest Mideast war by the United States, as it seeks to muster votes for the October 19 federal election.

BQ leader Gilles Duceppe has repeatedly touted the war as a "humanitarian" mission aimed at saving the people of Iraq and Syria from persecution by Islamist "fascists." He has coupled these lies with attacks on the BQ's federalist opponents—the Conservatives, Liberals, and New Democrats (NDP)—for opposing the BQ's chauvinist campaign for sweeping restrictions on the wearing of the niqab and other Muslim face-coverings in Canada's "public sphere."

Explaining the BQ's support for the US-led war coalition, Duceppe told Radio-Canada that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is an "expansionist" force. "Waving a white flag," he declared, "is not an option. Those who initially did in the face of Adolf Hitler did not last long."

In reality, the current war is the outcome and a continuation of the aggressive imperialist wars the US has waged in the Middle East over the past quarter-century. In its drive to retain and expand its strategic dominance of the world's most important oil-exporting region, Washington has waged and fomented regime-change wars across the region, causing untold death and destruction, and fanning sectarian conflict.

Moreover, the US has repeatedly enlisted Islamist forces, including those who came together to form the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as its proxy armies. This was certainly true in Libya—where Canadian Armed Forces pilots involved in the NATO bombing campaign described themselves as "al-Qaeda's air force." It was also true in Syria, that is until ISIS, swelled by arms provided by the US and its regional allies, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies, spilled into Iraq in June 2014.

Just as Washington used lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction as the pretext for its illegal invasion of Iraq. So today, aided and abetted by Canada's Conservative government and the likes of the BQ, the US is invoking the atrocities committed by ISIS to camouflage its predatory agenda. The Obama administration's recent denunciations of Russia for its support for the Syrian government underscore that the principal aim of the current war is the replacement of Bashar al-Assad's regime, a close ally of Russia and Iran, with

one more pliant to the US.

So eager is Duceppe to support the US war, the BQ leader has suggested that Canada and its key NATO allies should consider deploying ground troops. "We have to have this discussion with our allies," Duceppe told Radio-Canada.

Speaking to students in Sherbrooke this week, Duceppe vowed that an independent Quebec would not shy away from its international "responsibilities." I am convinced," said Duceppe, "that an independent Quebec would be part of the coalition that is fighting this group (ISIS), which is committing crimes against humanity."

Pierre-Karl Peladeau—the head of the Parti Québécois, the BQ's sister party in Quebec provincial politics—said last month that a seceding Quebec would demand a share of all Canadian state assets, including those of the Canadian military. He specifically mentioned Canada's fleet of F-18 fighter jets, seven of which are currently tasked with bombing Iraq and Syria.

Peladeau and Duceppe exemplify the Quebec *indépendantiste* movement's embrace of imperialist war and social reaction.

Peladeau is the proprietor of the Quebecor media and telecommunications empire and a notorious right winger. No employer in Quebec has been more aggressive in the past two decades in using lockouts to impose wage and job cuts. And for years Peladeau has used his tabloids to press for the privatization of health care and other public services, stoke a right-wing "anti-tax revolt," and promote anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim chauvinism.

Duceppe is a former trade union bureaucrat and ex-Maoist. In 1991 he was the first-ever candidate to run under the banner of the BQ, which had been created by dissident Quebec Conservative and Liberal MPs to push for more constitutional powers for Quebec. Duceppe was hand-picked to be the BQ's maiden candidate by the party's founder, ex-Conservative cabinet minister Lucien Bouchard, Quebec Liberal Premier Robert Bourassa, and the president of the Confederation of National Trade Unions, Gerald Larose. Six years later he became the BQ's leader, a position he held until 2011, when the BQ, despite the staunch support of the trade union bureaucracy, suffered an electoral debacle, losing all but 4 of the 49 seats it had won in the 2008 election.

The collapse of the BQ's electoral support was sudden. But it had been presaged by a steady erosion of support for the PQ, which during eleven years in power from 1994-2003 had imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history.

A year ago, when the Conservative government first proposed that Canada wage war in the Middle East, the tiny BQ caucus claimed to be opposed.

However Duceppe, who had retired from electoral politics after losing his own seat in the 2011 election, was quick to endorse the Canadian bombing of Iraq in his Journal de Montreal blog.

In June, with the opinion polls indicating the BQ was likely to be eliminated from parliament altogether in the coming election, Duceppe staged a comeback, with the BQ's neophyte leader, Mario Beaulieu, agreeing to step aside.

The BQ's emergence as a champion of Canada's leading role in the Mideast war is undoubtedly driven in part by reactionary electoral calculations.

Like the Conservatives, the BQ is seeking to stoke up a bellicose nationalism and anti-Muslim chauvinism. Its full-throated support for the Mideast war is meant to starkly contrast the BQ from its principal electoral rival, the New Democratic Party.

The social-democratic NDP has itself repeatedly backed Canada's participation in US wars and regime change operations, including the 1999 NATO war on Yugoslavia, the Afghan war, the 2004 ousting of Haiti's elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and the 2011 regime-change war in Libya. The NDP has also strongly supported the Harper government's provocative role in the US campaign against Russia, including the deployment of Canadian planes and ships on Russia's borders and the sending of 200 military trainers to Ukraine.

However, aware of the widespread popular opposition to Canada's involvement in another US war, the NDP has opposed at least nominally the current Canadian "combat mission" in the Mideast. Indeed, as the NDP has moved even further right on socio-economic policy—promising, for example, four years of balanced budgets and no increases in the taxes of the richest Canadians—NDP leader Thomas Mulcair has chosen to emphasize the NDP's opposition to the current war, casting it in Canadian nationalist terms, as "an independent Canadian foreign policy."

Duceppe has coupled denunciations of the NDP's "irresponsible" position on the Mideast war with denunciations of it and the other federalist parties for failing to uphold "Quebec values" by attacking the rights of Muslim women.

The BQ leader was quick to respond to a Federal Appeals Court decision Tuesday upholding a lower court ruling that struck down a Conservative government order that Muslim women wearing the niqab be barred from taking the oath of citizenship. The Conservatives' order would have the effect of barring from Canadian citizenship anyone who for religious reasons insisted on wearing a Muslim face-covering, since the

oath is mandatory.

Duceppe demanded the Conservatives appeal the decision to the Supreme Court, something they have indicated they intend to do. He then accused the government of being "incoherent" because it hasn't otherwise banned the niqab. Referring to the BQ's demand that women wearing the niqab or burqa be denied the right to vote and to receive public services, including health care and education, Duceppe said, "On the vote and public services for those with covered faces, the Conservatives, Liberals and NDP are on the same wavelength ... I find that appalling."

Duceppe sought to justify his call for discriminatory measures against Muslim women on the spurious grounds of gender equality.

The BQ's campaign over this issue is aimed at reviving the PQ's reactionary "Charter of Values." Under legislation which lapsed when the PQ fell from office in April 2014 after an 18-month period during which they formed a minority government, Quebec would have banned more than half a million government employees from wearing religious signs and headdress, although an exception was made for "discreet" Christian crucifixes.

Quebec's current federalist Liberal government recently tabled its own reactionary bill to "regulate" Muslim women. It would disallow women whose face is partially or full-veiled from giving or receiving public services.

Duceppe has seized on this to claim that only the BQ represents "Quebec's interests and values" in federal politics and that the federalist parties are formulating their policies to please Ontario and English Canada.

The BQ's support for the US war in the Middle East, however, has a broader significance than its crude attempt to exploit and stoke anti-Muslim sentiment. As Duceppe himself has noted, the BQ, citing "humanitarian" reasons, has supported every war that Canada has participated in since the BQ's founding in 1991.

While various pseudo-left forces promote Quebec independence as "radical", even "anti-imperialist," it is in reality the political project of a faction of the Quebec bourgeoisie, which aspires to have its own imperialist state. Such a state would function as a junior partner of US imperialism, or as the Quebec *indépendantistes* themselves describe it, as a loyal member of NATO, NORAD, and NAFTA.



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