

Canadian Special Forces battle ISIS militants as calls grow for expanded war

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21 December 2015

In what is being described as the most extensive fighting involving western ground troops in Syria or Iraq since the beginning of the latest US-led intervention in September 2014, Canadian Special Forces personnel engaged in a day-long battle with Islamic State (ISIS) militants last Wednesday.

ISIS fighters launched a major, five-pronged offensive in an area near Mosul in northern Iraq, employing hundreds of militants, suicide bombers and armored tractors. The Canadian force, which numbers 69 in total, called in air strikes by Canadian CF-18 fighter jets and provided their Kurdish Peshmerga colleagues with covering fire as they launched a counter-offensive. Planes from the United States, Britain and France also bombed ISIS positions.

At a hastily arranged press briefing Thursday, a Canadian military official sought to present the ISIS attack as a complete surprise. In reality, the direct involvement by Canadian Armed Forces personnel in sustained combat makes a mockery of the official claims that they are in Iraq merely to carry out training and other support work.

According to the Canadian military's own account, the Special Forces were assisting the Peshmerga in preparing a major offensive to retake Mosul when ISIS launched its attack.

Retired Brigadier General James Cox told the *Globe and Mail* that Canadian troops were just six kilometers from the front when the fighting started Wednesday. Straying from the official script, Cox said of the Special Forces deployment, "It's not training."

The incident also puts the lie to the claims of the new Liberal government that it will soon put an end to Canada's "combat mission" in the Mideast war by having Canada's military focus exclusively on training local forces.

During the campaign for the October 19 federal, the Liberals cynically tried to appeal to anti-war sentiment by saying that they favored Canada resuming a significant role in UN peacekeeping missions and, in the case of the Mideast War, withdrawing the six CF-18 fighter jets currently carrying out air strikes and expanding the Special Forces "training mission."

In spite of such claims, Canada's bombing missions over Iraq and Syria have continued uninterrupted since the Liberals took office.

And in an interview published by Huffington Post on Friday, Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan refused to give any date as to when the jets will be withdrawn, saying only that it will happen sometime in the next "six months."

Last Wednesday's firefight has meanwhile demonstrated that the expansion of the Special Forces' "train and assist" mission will draw Canadian military personnel ever more deeply into frontline operations and potentially a protracted ground war.

This is taking place under conditions where the US and the major European imperialist powers are stepping up their military involvement in the region. Earlier this month, the Obama administration unveiled plans to deploy a Special Forces contingent to Syria, and France, Britain and Germany have all either joined or expanded their role in the war in Syria.

While publicly presented as a response to the November 13 terrorist attack in Paris, the real driving force of this escalation is the western powers' apprehensions about Russia's military intervention in support of Bashar-al Assad's embattled Syrian regime.

Washington, working in conjunction with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, has been using Islamist militia, including elements that later went on to form ISIS, to topple Syria's Baathist regime, a close

ally of Russia and Iran. Through the installation of a more pliant regime in Damascus, the US aims to force the closure of Russia's only foreign naval base and, more generally, strengthen its domination over the world's principal oil-producing region.

Important sections of Canada's ruling elite, including the Conservative Official Opposition and much of the corporate media, have been calling on Trudeau to renege on his election pledge to withdraw the CF-18s.

They fear that Canada will lose a say in the new carve-up of the region, as well as leverage with Washington on other matters, if it reduces its role in the Mideast war as the fighting intensifies and the war in Syria becomes even more fully and openly intertwined with the western powers' confrontation with Russia.

Canada, which has a territorial conflict with Russia over the Arctic and views it as a rival in world energy markets, has strongly supported Washington in pressing its European allies to taken an even harder line against Russia in the western-provoked conflict over Ukraine.

The media campaign for Trudeau to abandon his CF-18 withdrawal plan kicked into high gear following the November 13 Paris terrorist attacks. The calls became even shriller following last Wednesday's firefight.

Commentators have highlighted the incongruity between Liberals' commitment to strengthening relations with Washington and their vow to withdraw Canada's fighter jets at the very point when the Obama administration is strenuously pushing for its allies to increase their participation in the war. "Allies will be moving one way; Canada in another," complained the *Globe and Mail's* senior political columnist Jeffrey Simpson.

Writing for CBC, political correspondent Chris Hall chided Trudeau for an "unclear" stance on the Mideast conflict and all but demanded the CF-18s remain in the fight. "Trudeau hasn't explained when those new trainers will arrive, how many more will be sent and what exactly they will be doing when they get there," declared Hall. He went on to dismiss Trudeau's stated claim that he should honor the verdict of the elections by fulfilling his commitment to withdraw the jets, saying that "kind of reasoning ... has everything to do with domestic politics." Hall has insisted that "events" have intervened.

Hall interviewed former Chief of the Defence Staff

Rick Hillier, who presided over the bloodiest stage of Canada's decade-long counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan, for the weekly CBC Radio political affairs program "The House." Hillier declared that he had not heard a "clear articulation yet of why we would bring home those CF18s."

"I think what happened [in Iraq] underscores the fact that this entire military mission ... against [ISIS] is under-resourced. More resources are needed in the military fight, not less," he continued, without being challenged as to what this implied.

George Petrolekas, who served in the Balkans in the 1990s and in Afghanistan, wrote in the *Globe and Mail* that in the wake of the battle involving Canadian troops, Ottawa "must rethink its CF18 decision." Arguing, like Hall, that "events" had intervened, Petrolekas stated that ISIS's ability to mobilize forces without being detected prior to the attack showed that "there are simply not enough aircraft to provide persistent air cover." He then went on to cite the presence of Canadian military "trainers" in Iraq as an argument to maintain the fighter jets in the region in a "defensive" capacity. Canadian forces could be "drawn into a battle" and it would be "prudent" to ensure Canadian jets could come to their aid.

Ever since they took office, the Liberals have been backtracking on their pledge to withdraw the CF-18s so as to avoid antagonizing Washington. In the days following his majority victory, Trudeau repeatedly refused to answer questions when the combat mission would be ended, focusing instead on his government's intention to deepen Canada's strategic partnership with the United States, the most aggressive imperialist power in the region and around the globe. Almost two months on, the government will only say that it is continuing to study the issue and that any withdrawal will be carried out in close collaboration with the US and the other coalition partners.



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