

Canada weighing options to expand its role in Mideast war

Roger Jordan
14 January 2016

At its request, Canada's Liberal government has received a series of proposals from the country's top military officer to expand Ottawa's involvement in the Mideast war.

According to the *Globe and Mail*, Chief of Defense Staff General Jonathan Vance has provided Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his cabinet with at least six options. These include maintaining air support for planes from the US-led war coalition attacking the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, deploying special commandos and sending regular soldiers to train Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters.

Canada's military currently has deployed to the Middle East six CF-18 fighter jets which are participating in the bombing of ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria, a refuelling aircraft and two surveillance planes capable of identifying targets for attacks. The combat mission was approved by the previous Conservative government in the fall of 2014, and extended and expanded into Syria in March last year.

During the election campaign, the Liberals made a fraudulent appeal to widespread anti-war sentiment by pledging to withdraw the CF-18 fighter jets and end Canada's "combat" mission in the Mideast war. At the same time, they indicated they would expand the military training mission that Canadian Special Forces' personnel are conducting in northern Iraq.

That the Liberal government intends to expand, not reduce, Canada's role in the US-led coalition war is made all the more evident by the options outlined by Vance. According to the *Globe*, the chief of defense staff is recommending the government retain the refuelling and surveillance aircraft in Kuwait while removing the CF-18s in accordance with their election promise and otherwise expanding Canada's military commitment to the war coalition.

One proposal would involve the deployment of 150 Special Forces troops to northern Iraq to expand the current "advise and assist" mission with the Kurdish Peshmerga. Despite claims that the 69 soldiers already deployed there are participating merely in training activity, they have repeatedly been involved in frontline combat and reportedly spend at least 20 percent of their time on the front lines. Last March, Staff Sergeant Andrew Doiron became the first Canadian casualty in the war due to a "friendly-fire" incident. Last month, many of the Special Forces' troops were engaged in a 17-hour gun battle with Islamic State militants, which included the troops calling in and directing air strikes from Canadian and coalition aircraft.

Vance has reportedly also proposed deploying commandos from the elite Joint Task Force II (JTF-II) to Iraq to conduct black ops, along the lines of the operations JTF-II carried out during more than a decade of war in Afghanistan. In that conflict, Canada took the lead in counterinsurgency operations in the southern province of Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold.

The general's list of proposals also includes the deployment of regular soldiers to Iraq to train both Iraqi government and Kurdish forces, the training of Iraqi forces in Jordan or the provision of police units to cooperate and train Iraqi police officers.

Foreign Minister Stephane Dion has said the Liberals will take a decision on what course to pursue in the Mideast war within the next 30 days. But before the final agenda has been determined, it is already clear that Canada is intensifying its military intervention in the region.

Figures released by *Embassy Magazine* show that the number of bombing raids conducted by the CF-18s during December increased to their highest level since July 2015, when 25 raids were conducted. Nineteen

took place last month and a further seven more were conducted in the first eight days of 2016, putting this month on course for a record high.

The new government's determination to retain Canada's major role in the US-led drive to consolidate its hegemony in the Middle East reflects the fact that a repartition of the world's most important oil-exporting region is underway. Just in the last two months, Britain, France and Germany have all committed to significantly increasing or commencing the deployment of air and ground forces to Syria and Iraq. While framed as a fight against the Islamic State, the reality is the western intervention has as its goal the removal of the Assad regime in Damascus, a close ally of Iran and Russia, and the realization of the competing economic and geostrategic interests of the major imperialist powers.

Trudeau and his senior government colleagues, including Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan, have repeatedly refused to spell out a timeline for the withdrawal of the fighter jets, even suggesting that they could remain in position beyond the March 31 deadline set by the former Conservative government.

Sajjan has also indicated that the Liberal government is considering military options encompassing a broader area than Syria and Iraq. Increasing instability in the Sinai, where ISIS-linked militias are active and where a small contingent of Canadian forces have long been deployed as part of a UN "peacekeeping" mission tasked with policing the Egypt-Israel peace agreement, could be used to justify sending more troops to that country. Without providing details, Sajjan revealed he discussed the matter with his Egyptian counterpart when he visited Cairo last month. During the same foreign trip, Canada's defence minister also discussed the prospect of Canada participating in a military intervention in Libya with Britain's Defence Minister Michael Fallon.

In recent months Canada has made available Canadian military transport planes to help supply French troops deployed to North Africa and the expansion of such assistance has also been raised.

In spite of the Liberals' pledge to expand Canadian participation in other ways if the CF-18s are withdrawn, the corporate media is clamoring for Trudeau to reverse his election commitment to recall the fighter jets. Numerous newspaper editorials,

comments and op-ed pieces have argued that the withdrawal of the CF-18s will compromise Ottawa's efforts to deepen its strategic partnership with Washington—a key plank of the Liberal government's foreign policy agenda.

Canada is deeply implicated in all three of the US's major military-strategic offensives around the world: in the Middle East, against Russia in Eastern Europe and the Baltic, and the military and economic encirclement of China in the Asia-Pacific.

More broadly, there is a concerted campaign within the media and political establishment to press for increased military spending and the equipping of Canada's armed forces with newer, more powerful weapons, including fighter planes, frigates and battleship. Due to his highly-decorated career as an intelligence operative for the military in Afghanistan, Sajjan has been identified as someone who can sell the need for an enhanced military and the ruthless application of lethal force to a skeptical public.

In a *Huffington Post* interview last month, the defence minister said of his experience in Afghanistan and as a Vancouver cop, "It's about doing your work and doing it in an honourable fashion, and unfortunately, at times, the type of work I had to do, whether it was in policing or in the military, you had to do it in a very extreme fashion and in a very aggressive way." Sajjan the added that while it would be preferable if conflict could be prevented, "at times it is necessary to do extreme things, to try to bring a security situation back down where you can start engaging and de-escalating."

In a recent editorial urging a major hike in military spending, the Liberal-aligned *Toronto Star* hailed Sajjan as someone capable of convincing the public that a modernized military able to strike around the globe is necessary if Canada is to maintain its standing as a G-8 power. The Liberals have already committed to spending increases in line with the previous Conservative government, as well as a full defence review.



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