

Canada to triple its Special Forces contingent in Iraq

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Canada's Liberal government announced Monday that it will triple the size of the Special Forces contingent in northern Iraq that is providing frontline support to Kurdish militia fighting ISIS and will increase the total number of Canadian troops in the region by a third to 830.

These moves are part of a broader plan to expand Canada's role in the Mideast war, while fulfilling the Liberals' election commitment to withdraw the six CF-18 fighter jets that have been bombing Iraq and Syria since the fall of 2014.

At a press conference Prime Minister Justin Trudeau emphasized that Canada's revised Mideast war mission was developed in close consultation with its allies, above all the United States.

The new policy includes the deployment of an extra 230 ground troops to the neighbouring countries of Jordan and Lebanon for purposes of "capacity building" and the continued deployment of two surveillance aircraft and a refuelling plane to assist the bombing of ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria. Canada will also deploy a team of senior officers to the US-led war coalition command center to assist in directing the air war, provide increased intelligence and a team of military advisers to the Iraqi government, and contribute \$1.6 billion in humanitarian aid and infrastructure support over the next three years. The latter figure includes already announced spending of around \$880 million for long-term aid and refugee support.

Trudeau and Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan, who were joined by Foreign Minister Stephane Dion and Development Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau for Monday's announcement, argued that Canada will be both increasing and better focusing its contribution to the war effort. Their comments were an attempt to deflect criticism from the opposition Conservatives and sections of the ruling elite who have claimed that the withdrawal of the CF-18s will weaken Ottawa's standing in Washington and its position in the imperialist scramble to redivide the Middle East.

Nonetheless, interim Conservative leader Rona Ambrose was quick to denounce the withdrawal of the fight jets as "shameful," a "step backwards for Canada" and a betrayal of its "military traditions." Since Canada was excluded from a January 20 meeting in Paris led by US Secretary of State John Kerry to discuss the war coalition's strategy, the Conservatives

and much of the corporate media have been coupling exhortations for the government to do more to ensure Canada's military presence on the global stage with dire warnings that Canada's influence among the cabal of imperialist powers is at risk.

Trudeau deliberately evaded answering a question on whether the Special Forces deployed to northern Iraq will continue to sight bombing targets for coalition aircraft, but the *Globe and Mail* reported that they have been mandated to do so.

Trudeau was insistent that his government has now fulfilled its election pledge to end Canada's Mideast "combat mission." This pledge was a cynical ruse, meant to appeal to popular antiwar sentiment, while ensuring that Canada would remain an integral part of US imperialism's latest war in the Middle East.

Going forward, Canadian forces will be playing a major role in every part of the bombing campaign except the actual delivery of payload: helping choose and surveil targets, sighting them on the ground, and refuelling the bombing planes.

No less mendacious was Trudeau's claim that the Special Forces' frontline "advise and assist" activities with the Kurdish *Peshmerga*, which have now been expanded to include the provisioning of light arms, constitute a "noncombat" operation.

Chief of the Defence Staff General Jonathan Vance was at pains not to contradict his political boss. But, speaking to reporters shortly after Trudeau, he warned that the Special Forces would invariably be engaged in battle. Said Vance, "We want Canadians to know that we will be involved in engagements as we defend ourselves and those partners who we are working with."

Despite an official "noncombat" mandate, the 69 Special Forces that have been active in Iraq since the fall of 2014 have repeatedly engaged in frontline battles.

Vance, who played a leading role in drafting the government's new Mideast war policy, added, "The Prime Minister has clearly described it as noncombat. In my view, it's a noncombat mission in that we are not the principal combatants here."

By such logic, it would be possible to argue that Canadian imperialism has never been a "combatant" since even its participation in the two world wars was conducted in alliance

with bigger imperialist powers—Britain and the United States, respectively—making them the “principal combatants.”

The Liberal government’s announcement came as Washington is moving in collaboration with its allies to massively escalate combat in Syria, where the US’s principal objective remains the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, a close ally of Iran and Russia. Last Thursday, Saudi Arabia declared its readiness to intervene with ground troops in Syria and there are indications that Turkey is preparing an invasion from the north. These developments are part of the reckless drive of the US to consolidate its geopolitical and economic hegemony over the world’s most important oil-producing region, so as to weaken its rivals, above all China and Russia.

Canada is playing a prominent role in the United States’ three major geostrategic offensives around the globe: in the Middle East; in Washington’s aggressive drive to isolate Russia and undermine its influence in Europe and Central Asia; and in its military, political and economic moves to encircle China in the Asia-Pacific.

In the week prior to the announcement of its new Mideast war policy, the Trudeau government officially signed onto the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the economic arm of the Obama administration’s anti-China drive, at a ceremony in new Zealand. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Dion visited Ukraine, where he reassured the Kiev regime that Canada’s announcement that it is resuming regular diplomatic contact with Russia in no way implies a lessening of Canada’s staunch support for the far-right Poroshenko government in its civil war against the population in the country’s east. While in Kiev, Dion reiterated the government’s commitment to implementing the Canada-Ukraine free trade agreement the Harper Conservative government announced last July.

The attempt of Trudeau and his colleagues to cast Canada’s Mideast policy as a “humanitarian” effort that returns Canada to its purported traditions of compassion and diplomacy is risible. While he touted humanitarian aid of \$1.6 billion over three years, his government is staunchly supporting US imperialism, the power whose succession of wars and regime-change operations have blown up one Mideast and North African country after another.

Moreover, the Trudeau government is pressing ahead with a \$15 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia and another multibillion-dollar deal with Kuwait. These authoritarian regimes are collaborating in waging a war in Yemen that has laid waste to much of that small country.

In explaining the government’s Mideast war plans, Trudeau and his ministers repeatedly pointed to Canadian Armed Forces’ nearly decade-and-a-half-long involvement in the Afghan war. Canada’s extensive experience in both counterinsurgency war and training “local” forces means, argued Trudeau and his ministers, that Canada has unique capabilities to bring to the training of indigenous forces loyal to western strategic interests.

Significantly, Trudeau made a point of noting that, because of the rapidly evolving situation in the Middle East, his government’s policy could be open to revision at any time. Going well beyond the previous government, he added that the current deployment would last at least two years.

Washington was quick to endorse Canada’s war plans. Pentagon spokesman Peter Cook said, “The Canadian announcement is the kind of response” the US has “been looking for from coalition members.” After Trudeau spoke with US President Barack Obama by phone, the White House issued a statement that said the president “welcomed Canada’s current and new contributions to coalition efforts.”

Discussions within Canada’s ruling elite indicate that the new mission unveiled for Iraq and Syria will form part of a wider military intervention encompassing the Middle East and North Africa and aimed, under the false banner of “fighting terrorism,” at assuring Canadian imperialism a role in this energy and mineral resource-rich region.

At Monday’s press briefing, a reporter asked Trudeau if his government is considering deploying forces to support French troops in several countries in north and west Africa, including Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad. The issue of a possible mission in Libya was also raised. Trudeau refused to rule out a military intervention in Libya, remarking that discussions with allies on all such matters are continuing. Sajjan is due today to meet with his NATO counterparts in Brussels for a two-day summit.

Meanwhile, around 100 Canadian Special Forces troops have travelled to Senegal to participate in the annual Exercise Flintlock, which began Monday. The exercise, organized by the United States Africa Command, involves the training of commando units from African countries, including Niger, Algeria, Mali, Senegal, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso. Personnel from the Royal Canadian Air Force and army medical staff are also involved. The Canadian military has significantly expanded its engagement in Flintlock since its first deployment of 14 soldiers in 2011.



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