

Canada's media pushes for more military spending, bigger Mideast war role

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12 February 2016

Many media outlets have responded to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's plan to expand Canada's role in the US-led Mideast war with scathing criticism, taking the three-month-old Liberal government to task for the supposed inadequacy of Canada's military engagement in the region and internationally.

On Monday, Trudeau announced a tripling in the number of Special Forces offering frontline support to Kurdish Peshmerga forces fighting Islamic State militants in northern Iraq to 207, as well as the deployment of an additional 230 troops to Lebanon and Jordan to support local authorities and participate in coalition command centers.

He also said that Canada would increase its intelligence efforts in the region, provide a team of military advisers to the Iraqi government, and invest additional sums in humanitarian aid projects. Canada's two surveillance and one refueller aircraft will remain in the region to assist in the bombing campaign in Syria and Iraq, while Canada's six CF-18 fighter jets will be withdrawn by February 22.

Canada's withdrawal from the bombing mission has been roundly condemned by the media as a bad move, injurious to Canada's relations with Washington and the fight against ISIS, and one for which the government has offered no valid reason. The *National Post's* John Ivison declared that Trudeau was leaving other countries in the coalition to fight ISIS, while his colleague Andrew Coyne claimed the Prime Minister had decided "to do just enough to avoid being publicly rebuked by our allies abroad without doing enough to be exposed to any political risk at home."

Even an editorial in the *Globe and Mail* that endorsed the government's overall plan to expand Canada's role in Mideast war chided Trudeau for failing to provide a convincing rationale for halting Canadian bombing of Iraq and Syria.

The Canadian ruling elite is determined to maintain its position as a one of the US's premier allies on the world stage. It therefore strongly supports Washington's drive to retain and expand its dominance of the world's most important oil-exporting region. At the same time, there are concerns over the implications of the entire region having been set ablaze by the US's wars and by the recent rush of regional powers and great powers, each with their own agendas, to redraw the balance of power in the Middle East and potentially its borders.

It is thus *Globe* noteworthy that *Mail* mouthpiece of the most powerful sections of Canada's financial elite, singled out for special praise those parts of the Trudeau government's war plan that will either expand Ottawa's role in determining the US-led war coalition's military strategy or give Canada independent influence with key actors on the ground.

In an editorial titled "Even if the PM can't explain why, his Syria plan could prove to be wise," the *Globe* lauded the government's plan to increase Canada's role in the coalition's command structures. It also highlighted the government's plan to dramatically increase the Canadian military's "advice and assist" mission with the Kurdish Peshmerga and to deploy officers to Baghdad to counsel the Iraqi government. "Canada," exclaimed the *Globe*, "will be on the ground, trying to help the people fighting what is now a proxy war" and "ultimately...more involved in the Syrian crisis than before, but no longer according to the dictates of...a coalition of countries whose alliances become more complicated and suspect all the time."

Beyond the immediate issue of the fighter jets, Canada's ruling elite perceives a much greater problem—the size and power of Canada's military. These are widely held to be inadequate in the face of rapidly rising geopolitical tensions around the world and the scope and scale of Canada's military commitments.

As well as playing a growing role in the Mideast War, Ottawa is partnering with Washington in its drive to intimidate Russia in Eastern Europe and the Baltic through the deployment of warships and NATO forces. 200 Canadian troops are currently in western Ukraine providing training to Ukrainian Army and National Guard units for their civil war against the largely Russian-speaking population in the country's east.

In the Asia-Pacific, Canada is committed to increasing its collaboration with the Pentagon under a secret agreement struck in 2013. Ottawa is also pledged to establish forward bases in Singapore and South Korea as part of Canada's contribution to the Obama administration's anti-China "pivot" or "rebalance."

Both "left" and right-wing media commentators are agitating for Canada to play a more prominent role in assuring "global

security”—that is, a US-led world capitalist order—and for the Trudeau government to push through the spending increases needed to ensure Canada’s military has the requisite firepower.

The response to Trudeau’s announcement from *Maclean’s* columnist Paul Wells was typical. He claimed that Trudeau had only been able to present the new mission as comprehensive and earn the praise of the Obama administration because his predecessor had done so little. Former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper had sent just six CF-18s into combat, complained Wells, and these had carried out less than 3 percent of the war coalition’s bombing runs. Comparing Canada’s involvement in the current war to its contribution to the US-led 1991 Gulf war, Wells wrote that Prime Minister Brian Mulroney had sent “24 CF-18 fighters and a force of nearly 2,000 soldiers” as well as two destroyers and a supply ship.

“The Harper training effort,” continued Wells, “was so rudimentary it is possible for Trudeau to triple it... The bar was set so low it is possible for (US Defense Secretary) Ash Carter, the toughest guy on the Obama block, to announce that Trudeau has raised it.”

Newspaper editorials and columnists routinely decry Canada as a laggard within the NATO alliance, because its current military spending represents about 1 percent of GDP, not the 2 percent advocated by NATO at its 2014 summit in Wales. In late January, the *National Post* trumpeted a report that Britain had sent a diplomatic note to Canada urging it, along with several other NATO countries, to do more to meet the 2 percent of GDP military-spending commitment.

Evan Solomon, in a second *Maclean’s* comment, declared the controversy over the withdrawal of the CF-18 jets from the current Mideast “really nothing compared to the deeper funding crisis facing the military.” He claimed “it would cost the government another \$2 billion a year for 20 years on top of what we’re already spending just to maintain the air force, the army, the navy and upgrade our technology for the North American Aerospace Defense Command”; adding that the NATO commitment to spend 2 percent of GDP “would be another \$20 billion this year alone.”

Neglecting to mention that Canada has been at war virtually continuously for the past fifteen years, Solomon went on to rail against the “Santa Claus promises” made by the Liberals on issues such as infrastructure spending and healthcare. The implication, although this was not spelled out, is that the Liberal government must do much more to redirect funds from the already reduced budgets for social spending and public services into equipping Canada’s military with the most up-to-date instruments of war.

The frustration of Wells, Solomon and co. is not so much with the Liberals, who have already promised to at least match the \$10 billion military-spending increase the Harper government announced over ten years beginning in 2017. It is rather with the Canadian people, who have greeted the aggressive turn of the Canadian political and economic elite

with scepticism and outright hostility.

Harper, who seized every opportunity to stoke a bellicose Canadian nationalism and bolster the military’s credentials, himself acknowledged at the 2014 NATO summit that the Canadian population would not tolerate an increase in military spending to 2 percent of GDP.

The Liberals have initiated a comprehensive defence review, which Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan has vowed to conclude by the end of 2016.

The pro-Liberal *Toronto Star* has already tasked the government and Sajjan to use this review as a platform to overcome popular opposition to increased military spending. In a January editorial titled “Canada’s military needs better focus and funding,” the *Star* urged Sajjan to develop a “vision” for “a genuinely robust fighting force” able to function in concert with the US and other allies around the world and to “fight for the funding to implement it.”

Other media voices, meanwhile, are urging the Trudeau government to consider further Canadian Armed Forces deployments in the name of fighting terrorism to oil-rich Libya and mineral-rich West Africa, where France, the old colonial power, has deployed thousands of troops. At his Monday press conference, Trudeau indicated that both are under consideration.

Writing in the *Globe and Mail* last Friday, Alex Wilner called on the Trudeau government to prepare a second Canadian intervention in Libya. In 2011, Canada played a leading role in the NATO regime-change war that has plunged that country into chaos, with Canadian fighter pilots boasting that they were acting as “al-Qaeda’s air force,” so close was their collaboration with Islamist militias. Pointing to the remarks of US General Joseph Dunford Jr. that US and British Special Forces are already identifying targets in Libya, Wilner urged Trudeau to “focus on “the bigger picture” and take heed that “our allies are moving on to a new front.”



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