

Fighting at home and abroad

Canada's two-pronged strategy in the battle against ISIL

Jonas Becker

On January 19, 2015, Lieutenant General Jonathan Vance, then Commander of the Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC), detailed the overall strategy of the Canadian participation against the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL); "The ultimate goal of the coalition is to degrade and defeat ISIL in the region. This is being accomplished in stages."¹ What does this mean, exactly?

The Canadian strategy is currently being applied in two strategic theatres: the foreign battlefields of Syria and Iraq and the Canadian home front. In Syria and Iraq, Canada has joined the Middle East Stabilization Force (MESF), launching airstrikes and providing limited ground support to militarily halt the spread of ISIL. They are also lending support to the Iraqi government as it attempts to re-capture key cities such as Mosul and Tikrit.

On the Canadian front, homegrown terrorist attacks motivated by ISIL have necessitated an increased focus on counter-information and national security measures to bring a halt to the attacks, and stop radicalized Canadians leaving to fight with ISIL. As stated by Minister of Foreign Affairs Rob Nicholson; "We will not stand idly by while ISIS and its affiliates continue their murderous rampage in an attempt to wreak havoc across the region, spawn splinter cells from North Africa to South Asia, and prey on youngsters in the West."²

Canada's role in the anti-ISIL coalition

Canada has militarily aligned itself against ISIL not only to stop the degradation of hard won developmental progress in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, or even

to stop the coercion of attacks on the domestic front, but also in response to an unprecedented level of human suffering. The world has been numbingly exposed to the daily roll call of war crimes and human rights violations, digitally captured and distributed, from battlegrounds in Aleppo, Mosul and Palmyra. Showing little regards for normal wartime conventions, ISIL has characterized itself by the deliberate targeting of civilians, rampant sexual and physical abuse of women and minorities, and the mass execution of prisoners of war. Over 230,000 people have lost their lives in the Syrian conflict alone, while Iraq has suffered upwards of 100,000 casualties. While black and white moralities are often overplayed, its actions and behaviour have unambiguously made ISIL a byword for evil. However, while something has to be done by the international community to halt the spread and appeal of ISIL, it is important to constantly reappraise whether Canadian involvement and airstrikes with the MESF is acting as a catalyst for the disenfranchisement and radicalization of Muslims within Canada.

Starting in August 2014, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) began military operations at the request of the Iraqi government against ISIL. Termed Operation IMPACT, Canada's contribution to the aerial strikes against ISIS



is comprised of six CF-18 Hornet fighter jets, one CC-150T Polaris refueller and two CP-14-Aurora surveillance planes. This is supported on the ground by 600 Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and CAF aircrew, technicians and ground crew, and the deployment of 69 members of the Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSFOR) to assist and train local Iraqi and Kurdish Peshmerga assets on the ground.³ These mentorship programs have proven successful, with CSFOR operators enjoying a close working relationship with the Kurdish Peshmerga. Canada has operations camps that are closer to the front lines with ISIL than any other coalition member in Iraq. Numerous Kurdish NCOs have gone on record praising the Canadian contribution, claiming they are “punching above their weight”. Fiscally, Canada has committed more than \$130.6 million in humanitarian and development assistance in Iraq, \$15 million to arm and strengthen local military assets, and \$10 million to address recovery and rehabilitation programs for victims of sexual violence and human rights abuses committed by ISIL.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper extended Operation IMPACT’s mandate into Syria on March 30, 2015, citing the continued use of the country as a safe haven by Iraq based militant groups as a galvanizing factor. This has

led to increased reach and accelerated levels of airstrikes against ISIL. As of September 8, 2015, the RCAF has carried out over 1456 sorties over Iraq and Syria, including 935 combat sorties by CF-18 Hornets. The lack of ground assets has made targeting airstrikes into Syria considerably more difficult, with over four airstrikes in the same period of time. The extension of the mission parameters does have symbolic value in emphasizing that ISIL is not out of the reach of the MEF, and it also sends a message to the still fragile Iraqi government that the US and its allies will continue to assist its security and development efforts. Unfortunately, it also puts Canadian pilots at greater risk, and may precipitate the fomentation of more attacks domestically.

ISIL’s success in Iraq and Syria is opportunistic, and largely achieved by capitalizing on the reoccurring state of warfare that has ravaged the region for the past half century. The training of local assets, delivery of humanitarian and developmental aid, and Operation IMPACT’s airstrikes represent the first part of the Canadian strategy against ISIL. CAF goals include the containment of ISIL advances from Northern Iraq, the support for previous legacy efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the gradual degradation and destruction of ISIL as an effective military threat.

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ISIL in Canada

Due to its international appeal and effective use of propaganda, the frontline with ISIL is no longer confined within the Middle East. Since the initiation of Operation Impact in August 2014, the world has been shocked by various high profile ISIL inspired attacks on the international stage. Most notably, these are the Sydney hostage crisis in December 2014, the Charlie Hebdo shooting in January 2015, and the Copenhagen attacks in February 2015. Canada's distance from the frontlines of the conflict was irrevocably shortened in two separate, homegrown attacks in October 2014.

The first of these attacks took place at the Canadian Forces base at St. Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec, on October 20, 2014. Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent was killed in a hit and run attack by Martin-Couture Rouleau. A self-radicalized Muslim who had been under an RCMP watch list for five months, Rouleau had his passport taken away after expressing a desire to join ISIL. According to the Prime Minister's Office, Rouleau had converted five of his friends to radical Islam, and had volunteered to pay their airfare as a group to go and join jihadist groups in Afghanistan several years prior. Rouleau was shot and killed in a high speed chase with RCMP and Sureté de Québec officers. Just two weeks earlier he had met with police in a mandatory evaluation, and had revealed no indication of his intentions. Following the murder, IS affiliated twitter and social media applications praised Rouleau's efforts. Abu Khalid Al-Kanadi, a known spokesman for ISIL, congratulated Rouleau, preaching that "Muslims in Canada, follow the footsteps of our brave brother Martin Rouleau who took revenge for Canadian military aggression in our lands."⁴

Just two days later, on October 22, Cpl. Nathan Cirillo was shot and killed while guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Ottawa. His assailant, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, was a troubled drifter who had turned increasingly to radical Islam as a form of succour, and had been placed on a CSIS watch list. Bibeau also had his passport revoked after he expressed his intentions to travel to Syria and take part in jihad against Western militaries. Denied his opportunity to fight abroad, he spent several days scouting out the Parliament buildings and planning his assault. Bibeau made it as far as the hallway outside of the council chamber where the Prime Minister was present before being gunned down by RCMP and Parliamentary Security officers. In a cellphone video obtained by the RCMP after his death, Bibeau revealed his ultimate intention was the beheading of a federal politician, and that his attacks were based on his religious beliefs and revenge for Canadian military ef-

forts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. Following the attack, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani praised Bibeau and urged Canadians once again to attack the government over its choices with Operation IMPACT; "what lies ahead will be worse, with Allah's permission...target the crusaders in their own lands wherever they found, use explosives, guns, knives, cars, rocks or even a boot or a fist."⁵

What makes this pattern of attacks so disturbing is that they are all homegrown in nature, organized largely in the style of premeditated lone wolf attacks with encouragement, but no real tangible assistance from external sources. Through its successes and effective use of online propaganda, the mere presence of ISIL as a successful jihadist movement serves to inspire these sorts of attacks all over the globe. Online mouthpieces and militants such as Al-Adnani and Al-Kanadi represent a valuable force for their continuing recruitment of foreign fighters into ISIL's ranks in Syria and Iraq. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence estimates that as of 2015, upwards of 20,000 foreign fighters have joined the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, surpassing the number of foreign fighters who joined the Mujahedeem in Afghanistan during the Soviet Invasion between 1979-1989. According to CSIS, approximately 130 Canadians have gone overseas to fight illegally with ISIL, compared to 2,500 Saudi Arabians and 3,000 Tunisians.⁶ One

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of these, Hasibullah Yusufzai, attended the same mosque in Burnaby, British Columbia, that Bibeau allegedly did.

In the aftermath of these attacks, Al-Adnani observed that "Indeed, you saw what a single Muslim with Canada

and its parliament of shirk (sic), and what our brothers in France, Australia and Belgium did, may Allah have mercy upon them all and reward them with good on behalf of Islam."⁷ Rather than sponsoring foreigners to travel overseas and participate in training camps, an expensive and risky operation, ISIL has recognized the psychological effectiveness of encouraging self-radicalizing, troubled individuals abroad. With little preparation or support, an individual with minimum encouragement and armaments can inflict heavy damage on civilian populations, as in Copenhagen and Paris, or target and disrupt the political centre of a country, as seen in Canada.



An insider's view of what to do

This is not the first time that Canada has had a brush with homegrown extremism. In 2006, during the height of the War on Terror, a group of radicalized Muslim youth that would become known as the Toronto Eighteen prepared various attacks against Canadian targets. These included storming the CBC and Parliament Buildings, opening fire in crowded civilian areas, and filming the beheading of the Prime Minister. The group was taken down in a series of sting operations with information provided by Mr. Mubin Shaikh, a self-radicalized individual who later renounced extremism and turned police informant. In light of the recent surge in domestic terror, he has been extensively consulted by Western security agencies such as CSIS and US Homeland Security. Shaikh has criticized the level of preparedness against further attacks. "Yes, I'm shocked that they got past security. But this just shows us that we need to get our act together. We have all these discussions about this issue as if we're inside a bubble. As public safety policy, it's just disastrous."⁸

To combat both ISIL support for domestic terror and the stream of foreign fighters heading to active warzones, Shaikh calls for the creation of an active agency that would

work with local Muslim faith and outreach groups. The aim is to protect Muslim youth via counter-information campaigns against ISIL propaganda on social media and the internet. Domestic, homegrown attacks represent a major threat to countries such as Canada and preventing them represent the other half of the struggle to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. In July 2015 the Prime Minister's Office issued a statement about the controversial passing of Bill C-51, an extensive domestic security and surveillance package, arguing that Canada was no longer immune to the type of terrorist attacks that had struck other Western countries across the world. Canadians should be prepared to support national security agencies as they take the necessary steps to counter and identify threats. This represents the second major goal of Canada's campaign against ISIL; the safeguarding of Canadian citizenry back home, the counter-information campaign against ISIL propaganda and mouthpieces, and measures to prevent the flow of foreign fighters and aid to active warzones.

The two-pronged strategy represents Canada's answer to ISIL's aggressive spread. Operation IMPACT has allowed Iraqi and Kurdish forces to regain 25% of Iraqi territory lost to ISIL in 2014,⁹ while the domestic terror attacks have led to increased security measures and public awareness of the

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threat that ISIL poses. Critics of this campaign argue that the only way for long term success, and the destruction of ISIL as a coherent body, is through the deployment of coalition ground troops. The deployment of ground troops, however, does not represent an intelligent step in such a culturally sensitive conflict. Firstly, the campaigns of Iraq and Afghanistan have taught Western militaries the futility of becoming involved in long term, insurgent conflicts, deeply rooted in local tribal and religious sectarianism. Providing tactical training, support and air cover provide a more tactful, hands off approach; the successes of the Canadian trained Peshmerga attests to the superiority of a locally raised ground force. Secondly, MERF's sustainability is dependent on keeping troops out of high danger situations. Current IPSOS-Reid polls suggest that upwards of 76% of Canadian back military action against ISIL, but the high casualty rates that would result from ground combat would severely negate this.¹⁰ So far, Canada's only casualty in Iraq and Syria has been Sgt. Andrew Doiron, killed on March 6 2015 in a friendly fire incident with Kurdish troops.

Canada has taken a leading role in assessing and beginning to contain the unambiguous evil that is ISIL, and has so far done it without the need for ground troops. Whether or not this leads to increased Muslim disenfranchisement and militancy at home is yet to be conclusively decided. As a nation that values a plurality of dissenting opinions, Canadians should continue to evaluate whether or not military force

creates more problems in the future than it solves in the present.

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Would you like to react?

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Canadian fighter jets participate in the anti-ISIL coalition (photo: Flickr/Canadian Forces Photos)