



*"and they shall beat their swords
into ploughshares, and spears
into pruning hooks; nation shall
not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any
more." (Isaiah 2:4)*

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Short-term gain for long-term pain -- Canada's Challenge in responding to Islamic State

The expressed desire by Canada to act forthrightly and without ambiguity in the face of Islamic State (IS) atrocities is understandable. But 13 years after the horrific assaults of 9/11 we have enough experience with military interventions intended to combat terrorism to give us pause. A military response to a non-state group using terror to achieve its goals, in the absence of a broader political strategy to achieve a sustainable peace in affected countries, can prolong the violence and lead to further harm.

As the Government of Canada and Parliamentarians consider Canada's response to the violent threat posed by IS in Iraq and Syria, it is important to remember that military action can produce short-term gains but add long-term pain for vulnerable civilians and targeted minorities already suffering in a conflict zone.

Parliamentary consideration of Canada's proposed military intervention is welcome. Timely public and parliamentary debate and full transparency by the government on its policy and its application are necessary in all phases of a military intervention – before, during, and after.

The political evolution of Iraq

IS did not suddenly appear out of thin air. Iraq and Syria are deeply troubled and fractious countries beset by violent conflict. Iraq has experienced military invasion and regime change. Syria is in the middle of a bloody civil war. Both require governments viewed as legitimate by their own people; governments that can compromise and address the grievances and demands of their various geographic parts and the many minorities being targeted by violence.

How is it possible to strengthen the rule of law in Iraq and Syria, support civil society, and increase respect for human rights in areas controlled by IS in the midst of a violent conflict? As a priority Canada should contribute to programs that create and strengthen democratic processes in Iraq and Syria through assistance to civil society and, where possible, state structures. There is a strong case for first bolstering non-military support for the initiation of an inclusive political process.

The United Nations and a legal framework for intervention

There is no denying the complexity of this conflict, and the difficulty in sorting out with whom, and how, to find a negotiated means of ending the violence. Any international intervention—military, diplomatic, or humanitarian—must be embedded within a comprehensive, ethically defensible, and sustainable peace process.

The proposed military contribution by Canada of special operations forces and CF-18 bombers to a multinational force in Iraq, and potentially Syria, is being debated in the absence of a credible international political framework to build sustainable peace in the region.

In these circumstances experience tells us that the coercive use of force is far more likely to fuel conflict and the extremism underpinning it, rather than defeat it. Without doubt there will be delays and frustration in finding workable diplomatic solutions under the auspices of the United Nations, but Canada's foreign policy must remain firmly grounded in the UN Charter and, more generally, in international law.

This will require sustained diplomacy that engages Canada and its coalition partners in talks with Russia, Iran, Iraq, Syria and others in the region. To work, the commitment to diplomacy must equal or surpass the commitment to military options if the international community is to find its way beyond the violence currently being committed by IS.

Intervention to protect the vulnerable

If Canada chooses to participate further in an international military intervention, the primary goal should be the protection of vulnerable civilians, not the military defeat of IS or other insurgent groups. The goal is to protect civilians while a political process takes hold. This is in keeping with the principles of the responsibility to protect, although the invocation of responsibility to protect for this intervention is null and void in the absence of a UN mandate.

Canada's political and military decision-makers must keep foremost in their minds the acute limitations of, and risks inherent in, foreign military intervention.

These limitations are particularly evident in the use of air power, which cannot secure the safety of civilians. Legitimate military targets for bombing are relatively few in areas now under the sway of IS. While an intensive air assault may initially suggest progress, it will likely leave IS, with its versatility and mobility, intact.

Canada's recent air support in the Libyan conflict provides an example of what does not work. While the air campaign was successful in the narrowest of terms--it led to the downfall of regime—it also resulted in a continuing civil war contributing to the destabilization of other parts of northern Africa such as Mali.

By contributing CF-18 bombers to the military effort Canada will be aiding a remote-control strategy that serves mainly to lower the risks for its own troops. The Government of Canada's current publicly stated justification for military intervention is that the threat posed by IS is a priority for Canada's national security. Does this not logically lead to the conclusion that Canada should now commit fully and publicly to the deployment of Canadian Forces on the ground to protect vulnerable civilians? If so, then we also need to acknowledge and accept the risk that Canadian Forces will take casualties.

Further, Canadian participation in an international military mission should be based to the maximum extent possible on a comprehensive understanding of the situation, including not only the geopolitical and security dimensions, but also socioeconomic and cultural aspects, and the root as well as proximate causes of the conflict. Deep respect for local culture, customs, and codes of conduct must guide Canadian participation, within the overarching framework of respect for international law. Is the Government of Canada confident it is now in this knowledgeable position?

The battle of ideas

Canada also should consider how its proposed combat mission might, in fact, further the goals of IS. It seems likely that videotaped beheadings were direct provocations by IS to draw the United States, Canada, and other coalition members directly into the fray. We need to ask what IS gains by our military response.

As UK commentator Dr. Paul Rogers points out, military intervention by the United States and others could build support for IS—both at home and abroad. He challenges Canada and its allies to come to grips with radicalization in their own societies. To do so they must confront some of the grievous mistakes and wrong behaviour committed in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere that are exploited by groups such as IS and al Qaeda.

Arms supplies and diversion

IS is now fighting with U.S. weapons acquired by overrunning Iraqi army bases. The irony should not be lost on us. Canada currently is providing airlift assistance to deliver military supplies to Iraqi and other security forces fighting IS. The Royal Canadian Air Force is reported to have delivered almost 226,800 kilograms of donated military supplies to Iraqi security forces.

What steps has Canada taken to ensure that these supplies are not diverted to IS or other groups in the future? This question also applies to Canada's \$10-million in non-lethal security assistance that includes helmets, body armour, and logistics support vehicles.

Humanitarian support

The Government of Canada's 2014 provision of humanitarian aid and emergency supplies to civilians is welcome. Canada has committed more than \$28-million to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Iraq, including \$18.8-million for populations affected by civil unrest and \$9.6-million for Syrian refugees. More is needed and should be offered.

The immediate needs of displaced people are paramount. Canada should make further offers to those in need to provide at least temporary resettlement in Canada pending resolution of the conflict and their potential return.

Strengthening the observance of human rights

The Canadian "Faith Leaders Statement" on the situation in Mosul, Iraq on August 1, 2014 condemned IS for threatening members of ancient Christian communities and other religious minorities in Mosul. Freedom of conscience and religion are essential to open, peaceful, and democratic societies, particularly where different cultures and faiths come into daily contact. This is the reality throughout the Middle East.

It is important that Canada lead in the protection of human rights for all people in the Middle East by working with both established and emerging state and community leaders, giving special attention to the rights of minorities, women, and children. This work can be further reinforced by Canada's Office of Religious Freedom.

Conclusion

The outcome of Canada's participation in a combat mission against IS is uncertain and may make the situation worse. The government and all parliamentarians should take the time necessary to consider whether the promised short-term gain from an air power focused combat mission outweighs the potential for increased pain and suffering for those who are experiencing the brunt of the current violence.

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