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Canada's Policy to Confront the Islamic State

by Thomas Juneau
May, 2015



POLICY UPDATE

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In the first half of 2014, the organization then known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant swept across north-western Iraq while it simultaneously expanded the territory under its control in adjacent portions of northeastern Syria. The group, which renamed itself the Islamic State (IS) in June 2014, is led by former members of Al Qaeda in Iraq and also includes Sunni Iraqi actors holding grievances against the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad (mostly former members of Saddam Hussein's regime and alienated Sunni tribes), as well as a wide variety of armed Sunni opposition groups in Syria. Many of them have bandwagoned with IS's success by either fusing or allying themselves with the group, without necessarily having much affinity with its ideology. As of April 2015, IS either controls or has an effective presence in an area spanning the Syrian-Iraqi border roughly the size of England. Estimates of its strength vary significantly. The CIA has estimated it at between 20,000 and 30,000, though some experts have suggested figures closer to 100,000.¹

By mid-2014, IS threatened to continue to expand the territory under its control in Iraq and Syria. There were even plausible fears that it could cross into neighbouring countries, especially Jordan. Even if IS had chosen consolidation rather than expansion, its presence would have worsened an already disastrous civil war in Syria. Additionally, it would have entrenched sectarian divisions and further weakened the central state in Iraq, and it would have represented a magnet and a safe haven for terrorists in the heart of the Middle East. IS has also openly called for attacks on Western states, including Canada. This is a plausible threat: IS – which can operate either indirectly by inspiring lone self-radicalized actors or directly by planning attacks launched by extremist travellers – has demonstrated both the ambition and the capability to carry through on some of its promises.

In response, in mid-2014 the U.S. built a broad international coalition to confront IS. In Syria, five Arab states (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain and Qatar) initially joined the U.S. in launching airstrikes against IS. In Iraq, a dozen Western states have contributed with airstrikes, trainers, and a variety of other assets. In September 2014, Canada announced that it would join this coalition targeting IS in Iraq. Canada committed for an initial period of six months six CF-18 fighter aircraft, two Aurora aerial reconnaissance aircraft, and one air-to-air refuelling aircraft. About sixty-nine special operations troops also launched an advise-and-assist mission with Kurdish Peshmerga militias in northern Iraq. Ottawa announced in March 2015 that it would extend the commitment for an additional twelve months, and that it would expand the area of air strikes to northeastern Syria.

This paper argues that this approach, even though it is highly flawed, represents the least bad alternative for Canada. This assessment can be separated in five steps:

- What are Canada's interests in the fight against IS?
- What is the strategy to counter IS?
- Is this strategy consistent with Canada's interests?
- Is this strategy working?
- What should the next steps be for Canada?

¹ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "How Many Fighters Does the Islamic State Really Have?" *War on the Rocks*, 9 February 2015 (<http://warontherocks.com/2015/02/how-many-fighters-does-the-islamic-state-really-have/>).



CANADA'S INTERESTS

Ideally, the first step in developing foreign policy should be to define the national interest. It is on this basis that states should then develop options to best protect and pursue their interests.

Canada's most vital interests – its security and prosperity – are not threatened by the emergence of IS. Unlike Iraq and Syria's neighbours, Canada does not share a border with IS-controlled areas. Spill-over in the form of massive refugee flows, border violence and large-scale infiltration by violent elements are therefore not direct concerns.

That said, Canada has a number of important, though not vital, interests affected by the emergence of IS. The first of these is homeland security: to protect against the possibility that Canadians, having learned terrorist skills in Iraq or Syria, could return home and launch attacks or train others to do so, or that lone actors inspired by IS information operations could self-radicalize and launch attacks on Canadian soil or against Canadian interests abroad.

Canada's second interest is alliance management: it is essential for Canada to be – and to be perceived as – a reliable ally and partner. This is especially the case with respect to the U.S., but also, to a lesser extent, with NATO allies. This interest is strongly tied to the first one: one of Canada's foremost concerns is that a returning Canadian or American fighter would transit through Canadian territory to launch an attack on U.S. soil. More generally, deliberations in Washington and other allied capitals are often the most important factor shaping the parameters of debate in Ottawa. When the U.S. commits to a policy – especially military intervention – there is significant pressure for Ottawa to contribute or offer political support. As such, assessments of U.S. intentions systematically represent a major input into Canadian decision-making.

Third, the rise of IS also impacts Canada's regional interests – a combination of secondary priorities that are important but far from vital. The most prominent is the stability of Canada's only regional ally (Turkey) and its important partners, Israel and Jordan. Canada also has an important interest in the stability of Lebanon, where tens of thousands of dual Canadian-Lebanese citizens reside.

Canada also has an interest in pursuing influence in Iraq, a key regional power. Iraq is highly likely to remain unstable for years to come. Nonetheless, it occupies prime real estate, sits on massive oil reserves, and has the potential to field one of the largest armed forces in the region. Canada therefore has an interest in expanding its presence and developing diplomatic ties. The Conservative government has also put growing emphasis on the promotion of trade as a major, and increasingly as the dominant, pillar of its foreign policy. In the Middle East, the government has pushed for the development of Canada's commercial ties to the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf. It has also expanded trade relations with Israel and Jordan. Iraq is a potentially important market; Canada therefore has an interest in expanding its commercial opportunities there.

Canada also has an interest in the emergence of a stable Iraq and Syria. A stable Iraq, in particular, is essential to regional stability; the past twelve years have shown how insecurity in Iraq affects its neighbours. Moreover, a strong Iraq will eventually emerge as a bulwark against Iran – a state that Canada, its allies and regional partners have long sought to contain as a central element of their Middle East policies. Iran benefits from a weak Iraq, as it is well



positioned to penetrate it and extend its influence in its western neighbour. A rising Iraq, however, will be a check against, not an ally of, Iran. A weak Iraq is open to penetration by external powers, but a strengthening one will eventually become increasingly autonomous and most likely return to its pre-2003 state of rivalry with its eastern neighbour.² As such, supporting Iraq's rebuilding, encouraging its integration in the world economy and developing diplomatic ties will help nudge it away from Iran.

WHAT IS THE STRATEGY?

Canada does not have its own strategy against IS. Rather, Canada can choose whether to endorse, and contribute to the implementation of, the U.S. strategy. Canadian officials will typically be consulted by their U.S. counterparts in formal or informal, bilateral or multilateral, settings, but this will not change the basics of the strategy; at most, it can tinker with secondary aspects.

The U.S. strategy is based on three pillars. The first pillar is to contain and hopefully roll back IS. The principal dimension here is military: the U.S.-led coalition seeks to stop IS's expansion and roll it back through the campaign of air strikes. At the same time, the U.S., its allies, and its regional partners have launched initiatives to choke off IS's finances, notably by countering its ability to profit from oil and historical artefacts smuggling.³ U.S. officials have clearly stated that this will be far from sufficient to defeat IS, but that such a containment effort is immediately necessary given the acute threat that IS represents.⁴

The second pillar is to refrain from sending ground combat troops and to avoid long-term entanglement; instead, the U.S. expects local forces to assume the bulk of the responsibility for combatting IS.⁵ Washington is therefore increasing its efforts to build these local forces' capabilities. In Iraq, it has provided material support, training and intelligence to Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Kurdish Peshmerga and Sunni tribal militias. The U.S. is also ramping up – slowly, with many setbacks – its support for select Syrian opposition groups.

The third, and by far trickiest, pillar rests on the understanding that IS is not the cause of Iraq and Syria's problems but a symptom, the consequence of broken political processes. It is but the latest expression of widespread Sunni alienation in both countries. Defeating IS militarily – in itself a long-term endeavour with no guarantee of success – would therefore only mask the deep structural problems at the source of its emergence. Given that widespread Sunni perceptions of alienation would not disappear, it would inevitably result in the emergence of a new expression of Sunni anger, perhaps one worse than IS. That is why the U.S. is pressuring the Iraqi elite to

² Thomas Juneau, "Iran under Rouhani: Still Alone in the World," *Middle East Policy*, vol. XXI, No. 4 (Winter 2014), pp. 92-104.

³ The US, alongside Italy and Saudi Arabia, announced on 20 March 2015 the creation of the Counter-ISIL Finance Group (<http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/j10004.aspx>).

⁴ For an overview of the US military strategy against IS, see "Statement of General Lloyd J. Austin III, Commander U.S. Central Command before the House Armed Services Committee," 3 March 2015 (<http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20150303/103076/HHRG-114-AS00-Wstate-AustinUSAL-20150303.pdf>).

⁵ See "Testimony of Undersecretary of Defense Christine Wormuth, U.S. Department of Defense, before the House Armed Services Committee," 3 March 2015 (<http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20150303/103076/HHRG-114-AS00-Wstate-WormuthC-20150303.pdf>).



launch a genuine process of national reconciliation, and why IS can only be comprehensively defeated through a viable peace process in Syria.⁶

Ottawa has not clearly articulated its views on a long-term strategy to defeat IS, though officials have made a number of statements suggesting that Canada broadly endorses the U.S. strategy. Canada has endorsed the premise that air strikes will not be sufficient to defeat IS, but are necessary as a first and critical phase to stop its expansion and weaken it.⁷ Second, Ottawa has clearly stated that it does not wish to send ground combat troops and that local forces should assume the bulk of the fighting against IS, with external support.⁸ The government has been somewhat less clear, however, with regards to the third pillar, the need to repair political processes in Iraq and Syria. Ottawa has certainly issued statements in this direction.⁹ Yet its actions – notably its diplomatic absence from Baghdad and its relative disengagement from Syria, where it does not recognize the opposition – suggest a certain passivity towards the critical importance of achieving long-term political solutions, despite its rhetorical support.

IS THE STRATEGY CONSISTENT WITH CANADA'S INTERESTS?

Is this strategy consistent with Canada's interests? Broadly, it is. Given Canada's stake in the conflict against IS, its commitment of resources to the strategy's implementation has been, so far at least, appropriate.

The threat to homeland security, first, is real, but it should not be overstated. According to the government, a few dozen Canadians have travelled to Iraq or Syria to fight or train with IS and other extremist groups.¹⁰ Some of them have been or will be killed, while a majority will return home without ill intentions. This leaves a handful who could attempt attacks. That is not a large number; at the same time, assessing which ones among the dozens of returnees do harbour nefarious intentions is hugely challenging for security agencies. In addition, IS spokesmen have regularly mentioned Canada as a potential target.¹¹ IS, in sum, does pose a threat to Canada, but not an existential one that would warrant a massive commitment of resources. Participating in airstrikes to contain it and supporting local forces to confront it on the battlefield therefore represents a modest commitment that is consistent with Canada's interests. A key question, then, is whether joining U.S.-led airstrikes against IS increases this threat. It is impossible to confidently answer this accurately. The answer may be positive, but at the same time, not joining airstrikes would not necessarily have sheltered Canada from the possibility of IS-inspired attacks.

⁶ U.S. officials regularly emphasize this point. See for example "Remarks at Syria Ministerial by Secretary of State John Kerry," 24 September 2014 (<http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/09/232086.htm>).

⁷ See for example "PM Delivers Remarks in the House of Commons", 3 October 2014 (<http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2014/10/03/pm-delivers-remarks-house-commons>).

⁸ See for example Prime Minister Stephen Harper's speech to the House of Commons announcing the decision to extend and expand the mission; "PM Announces the Government's Intent to Bring Forward a Motion to Extend and Expand Canada's Military Mission against ISIL," 24 March 2015 (<http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2015/03/24/pm-announces-governments-intent-bring-forward-motion-extend-and-expand-canadas>).

⁹ See for example the two speeches by Prime Minister Harper quoted previously.

¹⁰ As expressed, for example, by CSIS director Michel Coulombe, "Canadians in Terrorist Armies Threaten Us All," *The Globe and Mail*, 23 August 2014.

¹¹ It remains unclear what links, if any, the two perpetrators of the October attacks in St-Jean-sur-Richelieu and Ottawa had, if any, with IS.



Second, Canada's commitment puts it among the top contributors to the coalition. Canada's interest in being, and being perceived as, a strong and reliable ally is therefore satisfied. It is true that in a narrow sense, the U.S. does not need Canada's CF-18s; its air force possesses more than enough fighter aircraft to achieve American military objectives, while building a large coalition implies additional costs in terms of logistics, communications and interoperability. The Obama Administration, however, has clearly expressed its wish for this mission not to be perceived as another unilateral U.S. military intervention in the Middle East. What Washington wants from its allies is material and political support to ensure that the mission is, and is perceived as, multinational and therefore more legitimate. Contributing fighter aircraft was arguably the most visible way of doing this. Yet Canada's interest would have been at least partly satisfied by committing only training troops and refuelling and reconnaissance aircraft.

Contributing to a strategy combining containment through airstrikes with support for local forces is also consistent with Canada's regional interests. It is, in particular, the optimal approach to protect regional partners from the imminent threat posed by IS. It is also in line with other Canadian policies, especially its extensive security and humanitarian support to Jordan.¹²

The strategy, finally, is consistent with Canada's interest in developing its influence in Iraq – though it is only one step among many necessary for Canada to build relationships in Baghdad and Erbil. The ties that Canadian military and civilian officials are currently developing with their counterparts will be necessary – but not sufficient – with time to allow Canada to develop diplomatic and commercial opportunities in Iraq.

IS THE STRATEGY WORKING?

There has been much criticism of Ottawa's participation in the U.S.-led coalition against IS. The mission is running out of targets, say opponents, which suggests a fundamental problem with the strategy. Critics also lament that there have been few tangible gains so far. Others imply that the mission has escalated from its limited original mandate, lamenting this as escalation or mission creep. Some also point out that Canada has de facto allied itself with Iran and the Assad regime in Syria. Others highlight that there is no clear path towards reconciliation in either Iraq or Syria, the ultimate condition to defeat IS. Some critics, finally, believe that Canada should simply not be involved in the war.

Some of these critics raise valid points, especially through their reasonable warnings concerning the way ahead. Many, however, miss the mark. Instead, it is possible to cautiously conclude that the mission is, so far, moving in the right direction. That said, the hardest challenges remain ahead.

Air strikes, the first pillar of the strategy, have hurt IS. The group is far from defeated, but it has suffered many tactical losses and its momentum of 2014 has stalled and even reversed.¹³ Given

¹² For a brief overview, see "Canada to Provide Development and Security Assistance in Jordan to Address the Syrian Crisis," 23 January 2014 (<http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2014/01/23/canada-provide-development-and-security-assistance-jordan-address-syrian-crisis>).

¹³ Michael Pregent and Robin Simcox, "ISIS on the Run: The Terrorist Group Struggles to Hold On," *Foreign Affairs*, 9 February 2015 (http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/143022/michael-pregent-and-robin-simcox/isis-on-the-run?cid=nlc-foreign-affairs-today-021015-isis-on-the-run-5-021015&sp_mid=47994466&sp_rid=dGhvbWFzanVuZWF1QGFhdG1haWwuY29tSo).



the nature of IS – it is an insurgency led by highly-skilled and experienced individuals – it is normal for targets to be rare and progress to be slow. Another function of air strikes, often neglected by critics, is deterrence – by flying over Iraq and Syria, coalition air forces have compelled IS to stop acting like a conventional military force, which it did earlier this year when it invaded swathes of land by moving in convoys of dozens of vehicles.¹⁴ As a result, IS has not gained new territory since late 2014, with limited exceptions, while it has begun losing control over some areas, albeit slowly.¹⁵ IS finances are also being slowly eroded.¹⁶

The debate on whether the mission has escalated beyond its initial objectives deserves some attention.¹⁷ For some critics, this is inherently bad; it should be avoided irrespective of the situation in Iraq and Syria. But broadening and deepening an engagement is not automatically a wrong idea; it depends on context. In some cases it can be necessary to achieve a valid objective, in others it can be a waste of resources and perhaps even make things worse. In the case of Canada's contribution to the U.S.-led coalition against IS, there is no major escalation, as critics imply. Should the mission actually escalate significantly, however, it would be a negative development.

The debate first arose in early 2015 after the government faced criticism when it was revealed that Special Forces soldiers have been deploying to the frontlines alongside the Kurdish troops they are assisting and advising, and they had exchanged fire with IS fighters on a handful of occasions. Senior officers also confirmed that Canadian troops have been helping direct air strikes by Canada and other coalition nations. For critics, this confirmed fears of escalation and illustrated the transformation into a combat mission.

That this is a combat mission, and has been one since the beginning, is undeniable: Canada is launching air strikes, undeniably a violent action. It was not and is still not a ground combat mission, however. Troops deployed on peacekeeping missions occasionally get shot at; that does not change the nature of their mission. Whether on peacekeeping or advising missions, soldiers getting shot at and responding is force protection, not combat. In the case of the mission against IS, it would have been possible for Ottawa to decide that troops were not to go to the frontlines in their advising and assisting role, and were not to direct air strikes. Had this been the case, the basic parameters of the mission would not have changed, and Canada would still have made a valuable contribution to the coalition. But that that does not imply escalation; the mission still operates within its initial parameters, to advise and assist Kurdish troops and to launch air strikes.

The decision in March 2015 to extend the mission for another twelve months and to expand the area of operations for CF-18 airstrikes to north-eastern Syria represents an evolution. Its extent

¹⁴ According to Centcom, as of early February coalition airstrikes had destroyed 62 tanks, 693 logistics buildings and 39 boats; Kate Brannen, "Pentagon: Islamic State Is Hurting, but 'Nobody Is Saying They're Out of Schlitz'," *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2015 (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/27/pentagon-islamic-state-is-hurting-but-nobody-is-saying-theyre-out-of-schlitz/>).

¹⁵ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "ISIS Is Losing its Greatest Weapon: Momentum," *The Atlantic*, 6 January 2015 (<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/01/the-decline-of-isis-syria-iraq/384261/>).

¹⁶ A report by the Financial Action Task Force, an intergovernmental body designed to combat money laundering and terrorism financing, provides details on the partial successes of actions taken to squeeze IS finances; "Financing of the Terrorist Organization Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant," 28 February 2015 (<http://www.fatf-gafi.org/documents/news/financing-of-terrorist-organisation-isil.html>).

¹⁷ Roland Paris, "Evolution or Escalation? Canada's Military Operation in Iraq," *CIPS Policy Brief*, no. 26, January 2015 (<http://cips.uottawa.ca/publications/evolution-or-escalation-canadas-military-operation-in-iraq/>).



should not be overestimated, however. The government has not increased its commitment in terms of assets; strikes in Syria will be carried out by the same number of fighter aircraft. The commitment therefore remains relatively modest. Neither the rationale behind the mission or the strategy has changed. Escalation would result from the deployment of large numbers of ground forces units whose first objective would be to directly engage IS in combat. This is not the strategy and is highly unlikely to be, at least as long as President Barack Obama is in power in the U.S. It will not be a decision for Ottawa to make.

Critics have also lamented that by targeting IS, Canada has de facto allied itself with the Assad regime in Syria and with Iran (which is very active in the fight against IS in Iraq). According to them, this is at best, inconsistency and, at worst, unpalatable given Iran and (especially) Syria's atrocious human rights records. These critics rightly point out that the Assad regime has been responsible for a significantly larger proportion of the more than 200,000 victims of the Syrian civil war than IS. Yet this criticism confuses a specific convergence of interests with an actual alliance. It is undeniable that airstrikes serve Assad's interests by weakening IS. This is far from implying an alliance, however. There are multiple sides to the very messy civil war in Syria; actively confronting one of them does not make Canada an ally to all the others. IS regularly fights against Jabhat al-Nusra, Al Qaeda's franchise in Syria; Canada has not become an ally to the latter. IS is the more imminent threat; Canada and its allies have therefore devised a strategy that seeks to confront the challenges it poses first. But Canada and its allies remain firmly opposed to Syria and Iran on most regional security issues and continue to implement a number of initiatives to isolate and contain these two states. This is clearly an unsatisfactory choice, but alternatives are less palatable.

Efforts to boost the capacities of Iraqi forces and Kurdish and Sunni militias are progressing, but much remains to be done. The strategy is reliant on those local partners: it is they, not U.S. or Western troops, who need to defeat IS militarily. Air strikes will degrade IS capabilities – and they have already had some success at this level – but will not defeat it. The partial collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the face of IS's advance in 2014 therefore marked a major setback. The U.S. has since launched a new program to rebuild the ISF, but the needs are massive. As of April 2015, there is limited ground for cautious optimism. There is a foundation to build on while the Iraqi government has access to its oil wealth to finance the ISF's reconstruction. Nevertheless, it cannot be overemphasized how challenging the path ahead remains. The integration of some Sunni and Shia militias into state-controlled security forces and the demobilization of others will be especially complex but necessary steps.

If the glass can be seen as half-full in Iraq, it is largely empty in Syria. This is one of the strategy's main weaknesses: efforts to build a Western-backed armed opposition force in Syria have not been promising.¹⁸ As a result, an eventual military victory against IS in Iraq – a realistic but ambitious objective – would merely push IS into Syria, where it would maintain a haven for the foreseeable future.

The third pillar is the most problematic; its collapse could undo whatever success might be achieved under the first two. In the absence of a viable political process in both Iraq and Syria, the collapse of IS would most likely lead to the emergence of a new expression of widespread Sunni alienation.

¹⁸ Yezid Sayigh, "The Syrian Opposition's Bleak Outlook," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 17 April 2014 (<http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=55332>).



There have been positive signs in Iraq. A new prime minister, Hayder al-Abadi, replaced Nouri al-Maliki, whose authoritarian tendencies and Shia-centric policies had done much to alienate Sunnis and feed IS's narrative of Sunni marginalization. Al-Abadi has taken some encouraging decisions early on, forming a more inclusive government and purging corrupt and incompetent security officials. These are at best tentative first steps. Little has been done to reverse Sunni suspicion and alienation, the most important driver behind the emergence of IS.¹⁹ Cooperation between Baghdad and Kurds is also improving, though major political differences remain unresolved. At the same time, there is an inherent contradiction in the strategy. Canada and its allies want to see the emergence of a stable Iraq, yet a key pillar of their approach is to boost the military capabilities of the Kurdistan Regional Government, an autonomous sub-state actor. As a result, the second pillar of the strategy may bring short-term gains but at the longer-term cost of making the unity of Iraq more challenging. Far more damagingly, there is no prospect for a viable political process in Syria. This is the most glaring weakness in the strategy. It is not reason enough to abandon it, given the important stakes involved. It does highlight, however, the absolutely critical importance of renewing efforts to launch a peace process in Syria, as unlikely as success is in the short to mid-term.

In sum, the implementation of the strategy has led to some encouraging progress so far, but early optimism must be heavily tempered by the acknowledgement that the most difficult challenges remain ahead.²⁰ The air strikes have succeeded in increasing the costs of IS's operations and in blunting its expansion. As they will continue hitting IS hard in coming months and most likely years, air strikes will further erode its capabilities. Yet militarily defeating IS will require local partners to do most of the ground combat. Efforts to train them and build their capabilities are progressing slowly in Iraq, but not in Syria. IS, in any case, is a symptom, not a cause, of the deeply dysfunctional politics in Iraq and Syria; its physical elimination would be the equivalent of putting a bandage on a wound. Sunni alienation would inevitably see a resurgence under another form, possibly a more threatening one. To avoid this, a political solution is necessary. While there is ground for cautious optimism in Iraq, it is difficult to anticipate positive developments in Syria for the foreseeable future. In this context, as long as the strategy's first pillar is successful, its second pillar meets with some success, and the third sputters, the IS insurgency is a problem that Canada and its allies can, at best, mitigate by a policy of consequence management, not a challenge they can solve.

WHAT SHOULD BE THE NEXT STEPS FOR CANADA?

Ottawa should continue its commitment to the fight against IS, because it is in its interest to do so. Refusing an open-ended commitment is wise, however: it gives the government an opt-out clause should it eventually assess that costs outweigh benefits. The government should therefore maintain its policy of committing Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) assets for fixed, relatively short

¹⁹ Raed El-Hamed, "The Challenges of Mobilizing Sunni Tribes in Iraq," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 17 March 2015 (http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2015/03/17/challenges-of-mobilizing-sunni-tribes-in-iraq/i4fx?mkt_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRoiuKzPZKXoniHpfSx66u4qUaCg38431UFwdcjKpMjriYcDTsVoaPyOAgobGp5L5FEIQ7XYTLB2t6oMWA%3D%3D).

²⁰ Aron Lund, "The Islamic State Is Losing, but No One Is Winning," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 13 March 2015 (http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59367&mkt_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRoiuK3MZKXoniHpfSx66u4qUaCg38431UFwdcjKpMjriYcDTcVoaPyOAgobGp5L5FEIQ7XYTLB2t6oMWA%3D%3D).



periods of six or twelve months. This allows Ottawa to keep its policy aligned with its interest in avoiding entanglement in a long, costly and bloody conflict.

Canada should continue opposing the large-scale deployment of ground combat forces.²¹ IS arose because of widespread Sunni disenfranchisement in Iraq and Syria. Militarily, Canada and its allies can and must help local actors contain and weaken it. But ultimately, its defeat will only come if the broken political processes in Iraq and Syria are repaired. The large-scale and prolonged deployment of Western troops would prevent this outcome by pouring oil on an already burning fire: it would lead to violent resistance to invasion and would feed Sunnis' narrative of external occupation.

There is also no valid reason for the Canadian government to be so opaque with key aspects of the CAF mission, especially in terms of its nature, costs and objectives. The government has been constantly reactive, systematically providing limited information and only agreeing to release more when prodded by a minor crisis. It revealed, for example, that special operations troops had been advising from the frontlines only after it became known that they had come under fire from IS. Operational security is not a valid excuse: if it became possible to reveal that troops spend about twenty per cent of their time at the frontline, it would have been possible earlier.

Canada should also increase its capacity-building effort with Kurdish forces. It should do so cautiously, however. One of Canada's objectives is the long-term security and stability of the Iraqi state, yet by boosting the military capabilities of the Kurds – a sub-state actor poorly integrated into national structures – short-term gains are likely to hamper the achievement of longer-term objectives. Canada should also seriously consider the possibility of contributing to a train-and-advise program with Iraqi security forces. Ideally, this would be achieved through NATO, should the longstanding rumours that Baghdad will ask the Alliance to train its military materialize.²² This would allow Canada to increase its commitment to the second pillar of the strategy to defeat IS – supporting local forces. It would also allow Canada to increase its influence in Baghdad in the longer term by increasing the presence of Canadian officials, boosting their networks among Iraqi decision-making circles in political, military and business realms, and improving the Canadian government's knowledge of Iraqi politics and society.

Especially now that it has expanded its mission to include air strikes against IS in Syria, the government should ensure that it adopts a comprehensive strategy relative to that country too. Ottawa should primarily do this by increasing its ties to and support for the opposition and its support for a renewal of a peace process. Concretely, Ottawa should provide non-lethal support to palatable factions in the armed opposition (such as communication gear, night-vision goggles, helmets and rations). Canada should also increase its support to the political opposition, including to non-governmental organizations.²³

²¹ The government has clearly stated that it opposes the large-scale deployment of ground combat troops; see for example Prime Minister Harper's speech to the House announcing the decision to extend and expand the mission, "PM Announces the Government's Intent to Bring Forward a Motion to Extend and Expand Canada's Military Mission against ISIL."

²² "Harper Meets NATO Chief to Talk War against ISIL, Crisis in Ukraine," *The Canadian Press*, 23 March 2015.

²³ Canada already provides the opposition with limited support; see "Canada's Response to the Situation in Syria," *DFATD Backgrounder*, 18 March 2015 (<http://www.international.gc.ca/international/syria-syrie.aspx?lang=eng>).



Finally, in support of the third pillar of the strategy, Ottawa should ramp up its diplomatic engagement. Canada is the only G8 member without a permanent ambassador in Baghdad, nor has it made the necessary investments to position itself as part of an eventual political process in Syria. Instead of having its embassy in Jordan hold responsibility for Iraq from its base in Amman, Canada should open a permanent embassy in Baghdad. This is necessary for Canadian officials to develop deeper ties with their Iraqi counterparts. Opening up the Iraqi market to Canadian businesses, in particular, requires a sustained Canadian presence. In a commendable but far from sufficient move, Canada opened a trade office in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, in February 2014.²⁴ High-level Canadian officials – ministers, senior public servants, as well as business leaders – should also step up the pace of their visits to Iraq. Indeed, Iraq's population of over thirty million and its major hydrocarbon reserves imply that the Iraqi market holds significant promise in the long-term. Iraq's defence budget, in particular, stood for 2015 at around US\$20 billion, an amount that will likely grow in coming years. In rebuilding the ISF, the country will represent an attractive market for Western defence firms. Bilateral Canada-Iraq trade stood at \$3.4 billion in 2013.²⁵ This is not an insignificant amount, but there is much scope for this to increase.

Finally, this discussion raises the question of Canada's exit strategy. When, and on the basis of which criteria, should Canada withdraw or reduce its commitment? Ideally, Canada would steadily decrease its contribution as two conditions are progressively met: IS is increasingly weakened through air strikes and measures to choke its finances, and local partners – ISF, Peshmerga, and Syrian armed opposition groups – are gaining strength. Under this optimal scenario, withdrawal should be done by stages: Canada would first cease its airstrikes but continue its training mission, possibly for a prolonged period.

Under a more pessimistic scenario, if capacity-building efforts with local partners are not progressing satisfactorily and if political development stalls, Canada should cease or significantly reduce its participation in the coalition within three years. That is, if it becomes clear that the second and third pillars of the strategy are failing, Canada should at the very least seriously reconsider whether the investment is worth the cost and whether the strategy is the right one. Canada may have strong interests in contributing to IS's defeat, but it also has nothing to gain from blindly committing to a long-term quagmire.

²⁴ "Canada Opens New Trade Office in Northern Iraq," *DFATD News Release*, 13 February 2014 (<http://www.international.gc.ca/media/comm/news-communiques/2014/02/13a.aspx?lang=eng>).

²⁵ "Canada-Iraq bilateral relations," *DFATD Background*, July 2014 (http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/jordan-jordanie/bilateral_relations_bilaterales/canada-iraq.aspx?lang=eng).

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