Another Take on “Canada’s Policy to Confront the Islamic State” by Thomas Juneau

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June, 2015
The May 2015 Canadian Global Affairs Institute Policy Update “Canada’s Policy to Confront the Islamic State” by Thomas Juneau is an excellent examination of Canada’s participation in the multilateral operation to ‘degrade’ the ISIS/Islamic State (IS) forces in Iraq and Syria. And it is extremely interesting and thought-provoking, hence my comments here.

In his policy paper, Juneau asks:

- 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?

His conclusion is that although the approach taken by Canada “is highly flawed, it is the least bad alternative for Canada” (p. 1). This commentary will provide another take on the topic, with particular emphasis on Juneau’s last three questions. It will suggest that there are other alternatives for Canada. The alternatives will depend on how you define the effectiveness of the policy against the Islamic State/IS. Juneau argues that the definition of effective policy in this case is: (1) keeping the United States happy by participating in the multinational coalition against IS; (2) keeping Canadians out of the fight on the ground; (3) deterring/degrading IS through airstrikes; and (4) thereby creating a stable secure Iraq with which Canada can trade.

While airstrikes satisfy the visceral need we feel to do something forceful to stop a group that appalls us, this commentary will argue that the measure of effectiveness should be more long term. A policy is effective not just if it satisfies our visceral urge to ‘degrade’ the fighters who horrify us with their actions but rather if it eliminates the group in the long run. It is effective if it addresses the needs of Canada’s friends and allies in the region, prevents radicalization in displaced populations, and assists in addressing the roots of the conflict through political solutions, however tangled and difficult those may be. Although Canada must always remain cognisant of its relations with the United States, its modest influence in the world and its lack of understanding of a complex region, Canadian policy could be more effective – indeed, perhaps aiming higher than the “the least bad alternative.”

**WHAT ARE CANADA’S INTERESTS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST IS?**

Juneau discusses both the vital and non-vital interests Canada has in joining the coalition to degrade IS. In foreign policy terms, as Juneau points out, keeping Canada’s relations with the United States on a good footing is crucial. And because the Obama administration wants the actions against IS to be multilateral, it is in Canada’s interest to participate. However, we should
not exaggerate the extent to which Canada matters in US calculations, or the punishments that are doled out to Canada for not participating.¹

Juneau notes that Canada’s vital interests of security and prosperity are not threatened by IS. Canadians are lucky to live in a safe neighbourhood and this means that international military operations are usually discretionary. As Juneau says, because Canada doesn’t share a border with IS-controlled territories, large-scale violence is “not a direct concern” (p. 2). I agree with this conclusion but, given the hyperbole about ramping up security in Canada, it would appear that the Canadian government does not. However, Juneau’s distinction between ‘security’ as a vital interest and ‘homeland security’ as an important but not vital interest is somewhat puzzling.

As Juneau points out, Canada’s relations in the Middle East, particularly with Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel are important interests. Before acting we should ask how these relations are best served. This will be addressed in the section ‘Is the Strategy Working?’ The country that Juneau emphasizes as a potential area of interest for Canada is Iraq. He says that pursuing influence in Iraq is important for Canada, in particular for economic/trade reasons. He notes that Iraq could be a key regional power, “a potentially important market,” and “it has the potential to field one of the largest armed forces in the region” (p. 2). Indeed, as Canada attempts to fashion itself into a major arms exporter – witness the recent deal with Saudi Arabia – weapon deals with Iraq could be significant in the future. Unfortunately, some of the weaponry that the United States provided to the post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi army has ended up in the hands of IS. But, on the positive side, that means more sales! (The potential for increased trade with Iraq will be discussed more in the next section.)

Juneau also mentions that Canada has an interest in a stable, strong Iraq as a “bulwark against Iran,” and that “a weak Iraq is open to penetration by external powers” (pp. 2–3). These points are contestable for several reasons. First, Juneau mentions rebuilding ‘Iraq’. It seems exceedingly unlikely that Iraq as we know it will exist in the future – this Humpty Dumpty can’t be put back together again. Second, even if Iraq can be put back together, it will still have a majority Shiite population, which means it will have natural ties with Iran (although there are differences in language and culture and some concern in Iraq about Persian influence). Iran and Iraq did indeed fight a vicious war in the 1980s, but that was when Iraq was controlled by Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Ba’ath Party, which was predominantly Sunni. For the foreseeable future, Iraq will have a majority Shiite population, so why it would necessarily be a strategic competitor to Iran is not clear.

Are there other major Canadian government interests related to the IS crisis which are not discussed by Juneau? I would mention two additional government interests. First, Canadian public opinion is in favour of participation in the coalition, even in Quebec which traditionally

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opposes participation in such operations. Public opinion is fickle and this support could change quickly but for now it is in the interests of the government to participate in the mission. Second, in 2013, the Harper government established the Office of Religion Freedom. IS actions against religious minorities in Iraq and Syria are tailor-made for the government’s plan to promote and protect religious freedom. Minority religious groups, including a variety of Muslim groups, Yazidis and Christians, are being systematically and violently removed from a region where they have lived for centuries. Taking action to stop what looks like genocide in the areas controlled by IS seems like it would be a major Canadian interest.

IS THE STRATEGY CONSISTENT WITH CANADA’S INTERESTS? AND DOES THE STRATEGY WORK?

As Juneau points out, Canada is not in a position to shape the strategy to counter IS. Canada has joined a coalition formed by the United States and in which the United States makes the major decisions – as Canada has done for most international military operations since World War Two. Juneau discusses the US strategy in terms of three pillars: (1) militarily contain/roll back IS forces; (2) refrain from sending ground troops, avoid long entanglements, use local forces; and (3) recognize that IS is a symptom of “broken political processes” (p. 3). The Harper government is onboard with this strategy. But, as Juneau points out, Canada has put little emphasis on the third pillar – remaining cool to playing a role in ending Syria’s conflict and not having diplomatic representation in Baghdad.

A ministerial-level plenary session for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was held in Brussels, Belgium, in December 2014. The group issued a joint statement which listed five ‘lines of effort’ to combat IS:

1. Supporting military operations, capacity building and training;
2. Stopping the flow of foreign fighters;
3. Cutting off ISIL’s access to financing and funding;
4. Addressing humanitarian crises; and
5. De-legitimizing ISIL’s ideology.

How can we assess Canada’s policy and success based on Juneau’s pillars and this strategy?

As a member of the military coalition to ‘degrade’ IS, Canada has committed six F-18s, two Aurora CP-140M long-range patrol/surveillance aircraft, one refuelling aircraft and some special forces troops to train and assist Iraqi Kurdish forces. The most attention has been paid to the

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Juneau also argues that Canadian participation in the coalition satisfies Canada’s need to be seen as a “strong and reliable ally” (p. 5) and to help with the US goal to make this a multinational coalition. He says that “containment through airstrikes with support for local forces is consistent with Canada’s regional interests” and is “the optimal approach to protect regional partners from the imminent threat posed by IS” (p. 5). It’s hard to argue against the utility of the Aurora patrol/surveillance aircraft – they’ve apparently provided very useful information. It’s the airstrikes that raise questions. A primary function of any government is the protection of its citizens, and so a major calculation about participation in this coalition against IS should be if it will enhance or reduce the security of Canadians. Will participation in the airstrikes make Canada less secure? As Juneau notes, it’s impossible to know if participation will increase the risk of IS attack on Canada. It has certainly put us on the radar, and Canada has been specifically mentioned in IS communications.4

That brings us to the crucial question – do airstrikes work? I have five comments to make here. First, it’s extremely difficult to know how effective airstrikes are in the absence of a control group. (As well, we have very little information about the operations against IS, and any information we do receive usually comes from the military itself.) There has been debate about the effectiveness of airstrikes since the US bombing of North Vietnam in the 1960s-1970s. Those who argue that they are effective cite the example the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia to persuade a reluctant Slobodan Milosevic to the negotiating table. In this case airstrikes seem to have worked, although even in this case there are indications that the bombing was not the decisive factor. But do they work usually? There are a few studies arguing that airstrikes are effective but there are significantly more studies arguing that they are not, particularly in the absence of forces on the ground.5

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4 Indeed, police found material that indicated that the actions by Michael Zehaf-Bibeau in Ottawa in October 2014 were in part inspired by Canada’s participation in the airstrikes in the Middle East.

Second, airstrikes may be effective if they are supported by ground troops. As Juneau notes, a fundamental element of the strategy against IS is that there will be no Western boots on the ground. Thus the operation relies on local troops. The problem, however, is that the coalition objectives in this case may not correspond with the objectives of the groups providing the troops on the ground. So, the airstrikes may be effective in furthering the goals of troops on the ground – i.e., Kurds to expand their territory, Shiite militias to clear the territory of Sunnis – but not effective in achieving what Canada states are its objectives.

Third, Juneau states that airstrikes can serve as a deterrent, and they can be effective at stopping massed troops and preventing them from moving themselves and their equipment to other sites. This is a good point although, as the recent IS capture of Ramadi and Palmyra indicates, apparently not always true.

Fourth, as in Libya in 2011, there have been sorties undertaken in which no missiles have been fired because there are no targets. IS military leaders know that they are being watched and try to avoid large-scale movements. Plus, IS doesn’t build anything, so targets are difficult to find. Using an expensive military aircraft and expensive missiles to destroy a tractor is not cost-effective. And when you destroy infrastructure you’re hurting IS but also those people unfortunate enough to live in the area as well – which is no way to make friends of already unhappy Sunnis. IS holds several major cities and in an urban setting it is difficult to conduct airstrikes without killing civilians. This is particularly a problem when the forces conducting the strikes lack good intelligence on the ground.

Fifth, the strongest argument against airstrikes is that they don’t lead to a reduction of radical forces but to an increase of them. Airstrikes (and drone strikes) can be very effective at killing the leaders of radical groups but this does not kill the group. A new leader will be selected, and this new leader will often be younger and more radical, and the airstrikes will bolster the cause, particularly if civilians are killed. There are unintended consequences of airstrikes (and drone strikes) – David Kilcullen refers to “accidental guerrilla syndrome,” in which formerly neutral civilians become radicalized by events. After many years of airstrikes against Al Qaeda, in which leaders have been regularly removed, Al Qaeda (and its franchises) is going strong, and in addition we now have IS, Boko Haram, Al Shabaab, the Haqqani network, and so on, and seemingly more terrorists who are more radical than ever.

If airstrikes are the flashy side of the policy, then stopping the financing of terrorist or criminal groups is the boring side. This is an un-sexy but often effective way to shut down both criminal organizations and terrorist ones. Drying up the finance for these groups is absolutely imperative, and is one of the five ‘lines of effort’ to be pursued by the US-led coalition. Juneau mentions that IS finances are slowly being eroded (p. 6), and there are rumours that the financial situation for IS is beginning to pinch. It may not be able to make as much money as in the past off oil,

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6 See, for example, Andrew Cockburn, Kill Chain: The Rise of High-Tech Assassins (New York: Henry Holt, 2015).
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antiquities, kidnapping, captured banks/bank accounts and private Saudi financing. (Unfortunately, with the capture of Palmyra, IS acquired a treasure trove of antiquities to sell.) Despite the effectiveness of targeting the sources of finances to disrupt criminal and terrorist organizations, there is little indication that Canada is an enthusiastic actor in this ‘line of effort.’

Another part of the US/coalition strategy is to stop the flow of foreign fighters to IS and thus starve it of personnel. A number of countries including Canada have adopted laws that criminalize travel for the purposes of joining a terrorist organization, and that may have slowed the flow of volunteers to IS. (Whether this will increase attacks at home is a topic for another day.) Nonetheless, IS still seems to have no difficulty attracting new recruits and getting new groups to pledge fealty. According to one count, thirty-five groups from countries ranging from A (Afghanistan) to Y (Yemen) have now pledged allegiance to IS.8

A key part of the US/coalition strategy is to train and build capacity in local forces. Canada is helping in this regard. Juneau is fairly positive about progress being made in Iraq under Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi, saying that he has taken “tentative first steps” to repair the religious fault-lines in Iraq (p. 8). Hopefully Juneau is right, but it still may be too little too late and take years to un-do the damage that President al-Maliki did to Iraqi society and the military.

Is the coalition training strategy working? Training is a long-term project, and it’s difficult to tell right now how effective it will be. However, despite years of American military spending and training in Iraq, the forces still don’t seem keen to fight, and much IS weaponry has come from materiel taken from military bases when Iraqi forces abandoned them. US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter recently said in an interview with Barbara Starr on CNN that the Iraqi forces don’t have the will to fight.9 Frankly I don’t blame them. The foreign coalition warplanes sail over at 30,000 feet firing missiles but the local forces are expected to fight and possibly get killed – or worse, captured and then executed horrifically – to push back IS. As William Astore, former US Air Force lieutenant said in 2014, “military training, no matter how intensive, and weaponry, no matter how sophisticated and powerful, is no substitute for belief in a cause.”10 Iraqi army forces are mainly conscripts who don’t want to give their lives for a unified Iraq, a cause in which they don’t believe. What makes us think that a little training and capacity-building now will help this?11

Training local troops is a good idea – the problem of IS must be solved by people in the region – but finding a way to motivate the troops to fight and training them to be effective is a long-term process. What happens in the short term? What is not a good idea to fill the gap in the short term is using Shiite militias to help defeat IS and take back territory. Shiite militias may push back IS forces, but they don’t provide much of a choice for Sunnis stuck in the middle – they

11 For a discussion on the disastrous state of the Iraqi army, see Matt Schiavenza, “Why Iraq’s Military has No Will to Fight,” The Atlantic, 25 May 2015.
may not want to live under IS but they sure as hell don’t want the Iranian/Shiite militias in their neighbourhood! As the Canadian government is very anti-Iran, it seems strange that the coalition/Canada is now relying so heavily on Iranian-backed militias to counter IS forces on the ground.

Perhaps the best test of whether the strategy will work is to look at the long term – say, 15 years from now. What will be the effects of the policy in 15 years? This is the motivation behind ‘lines of effort’ #4 (humanitarian work) and #5 (delegitimizing IS). And it is in the long term that we see the fruits of the humanitarian element, an element which is lacking in Juneau’s discussion.

Juneau notes that it is an important Canadian interest to have good relations with Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. We should, therefore, find out what their priorities are. All three of these countries need assistance to deal with the refugees on their territory. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), as of 28 May 2015, there are 3,979,560 persons of concern from the conflict in Syria – and these are only registered refugees, the number is likely much higher and does not include people displaced within Syria (and Iraq). As of the end of May 2015, there are 1,761,486 registered refugees in Turkey (population 74 million), 1,183,327 in Lebanon (population 4.5 million), and 628,160 in Jordan (population 6.5 million). While Turkey has the largest population of refugees, it also has the largest population and economy, so Syrian refugees represent only 2.4% of its population. But for Jordan, registered Syrian refugees represent 9.8% of the population and for Lebanon, a whopping 26.7% of the population. Again, it should be noted that these are only registered refugees, so the actual number will be higher. For these countries, taking care of refugees is an enormous task. And with no end in sight to the Syrian conflict, it looks like it could be a long-term project. According to UNHCR about 25% of these people are less than 18 years old. This means that there are about one million children who need education, and some sort of future, or they will provide a vast pool of new recruits for fundamentalist groups.

If Canada wants to serve the interest of its allies and friends in the region, then humanitarian aid would seem to be a high priority. Canada has certainly provided assistance. A government press release in May 2015 says “[s]ince the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Canada has committed more than $710 million in humanitarian, stabilization and security programming for Syrians affected by conflict and for countries neighbouring Syria,” plus “$67.4 million in humanitarian assistance to United Nations agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and non-governmental organizations.” Canada has also committed to resettle 10,000 Syrians by the end of 2017, bringing to 11,300 the total number Canada has committed to resettling over several years (of almost four million registered refugees!), and total Iraqi resettlement.

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13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
commitment to 23,000 refugees.”

But, while useful, these contributions are not enough. Governments must make choices on how revenue is spent, but choices should be based on consideration of the effectiveness of that money to achieve the country’s interests. The Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) estimates the cost of participation for six months in the coalition against IS to be between $128.8 million and $166.4 million. This means that the government is spending more on the coalition mission (using the PBO’s lowest estimate) per year than on the humanitarian effort. This choice means less money is available for deradicalization and humanitarian programs. We don’t know if increased humanitarian assistance to refugees reduces recruitment to criminal or terrorist organizations but it seems like a good bet.

If Canada is concerned about relations with Turkey – a fellow NATO member – again we need to consider what Turkey wants. Turkey’s priorities in its neighbourhood can be listed as: (1) get help with refugees; (2) keep relations with Turkish Kurds on an even kilter and keep them in Turkey; and (3) remove President Bashar al-Assad from power in Syria. Part of the Canadian mission in Iraq is to help train Iraqi Kurds so they can be more effective fighters against IS – i.e., be the local boots on the ground. But Turkey wants to make sure that outside interaction with Iraqi Kurds does not destabilize its relationship with its Kurdish population.

Juneau lists improved relations with Iraq as an important Canadian interest in the fight. But, as Juneau himself briefly notes (p. 8), helping the Kurds is not likely to help Iraq become a strong regional power. Making the Kurds a more formidable fighting force and providing them with weaponry only makes it more likely that they will break from Iraq and become independent – which takes us back to Humpty Dumpty. Before blundering about in a complicated region, Canada must have a clear sense of what exactly its interests are in the area.

As well, there are growing concerns about what’s going on in the territory of the Iraqi Kurds. This region is a beacon of rights and stability compared to the area around it but there are signs that rights and tolerance are being eroded as the conflict in Iraq goes on. As well, there are continuing tensions between the two main Kurdish groups (PDK and PUK). Canada needs to make sure that any training and weapons given to the Kurds doesn’t exacerbate tensions and lead to civil war within the Iraqi Kurdish territory (as happened in the 1990s), or end up in Turkey being used to help the cause of Turkish Kurds. The International Crisis Group notes that any military assistance to Iraq Kurds should be tied to the creation and strengthening of a unified Kurdish force, not militias. There was an incident in Kurdish territory in April 2015

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18 See Jenna Krajeski, “How the War with ISIS has Exposed Kurdistan’s Internal Divisions,” The Nation, 6 April 2015.

involving a *Globe & Mail* reporter investigating the death of a Canadian soldier who was denied access by a low-level Kurdish-Canadian translator – despite the reporter having permission from the Kurdish presidency and the Kurdish military command. This indicates that there may be some uncertainty to the chain of command among Kurdish forces.20

So, is the strategy working? To sum up, most studies that have examined airstrikes conclude that they don’t work and, indeed, they may lead to radicalization. Working with the Iraqi Kurds may exacerbate local tensions among the Kurds, anger a NATO ally (Turkey), and contribute to the breakup of Iraq. More than 10 years of US training of Iraqi forces on the ground hasn’t worked thus far – although it’s possible it will in the future – and captured weaponry has been very helpful for IS. Using Shiite militias won’t help solve the problem of Sunni feelings of alienation and persecution, and indeed may make them worse. And let’s not forget how Canada (and other coalition members) has leapt from condemnation of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to, in essence, supporting him in the civil war by working to ‘degrade’ the most effective force opposing him.

In testimony to the US Senate Armed Forces Committee after IS took Ramadi and Palmyra, General Jack Keane, former deputy commander of the US Army, said of airstrikes, “I can say with certainty that this strategy will not defeat [IS].”21 Enough said.

**WHAT SHOULD THE NEXT STEPS BE FOR CANADA?**

As Juneau points out, the third pillar – the political solution – “is the most problematic” (p. 7). It is also the most important. There has been virtually no progress in talks to end the Syrian civil war, and only marginal progress in Iraq to overcome the slide into sectarianism. Canada has not been active in pushing for a political solution and in fact it has been very quiet in this regard.

Juneau says that Canada must “ramp up its diplomatic engagement” (p. 9). Absolutely. Oddly, economic considerations seem to be emphasized over political solutions by the Canadian government. Thus number one on the government’s list of the roles for the embassy that is responsible for covering Iraq is “to contribute to Canada’s economic prosperity through the expansion of the Canadian-Iraqi trade and investment relationship.”22 Until the political problems are solved and the conflict ended, increasing trade/private sector involvement in Iraq will be difficult.

We should be under no illusions that a political solution(s) will be easy. (Westerners tend to assume that a solution is available for all problems, and it just takes enough negotiation until a bargain based on compromise is achieved. In this case, we may be wrong. Fundamentalist/extremist groups are not known to be big on compromise.) We must not over-

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estimate Canada’s ability to be a major contributor to a political solution. However, Canada could offer – as it did with US-Cuba talks – its good offices to see if it can help resolve the Syrian conflict. This may seem beyond the scope of Canada’s reach, but as Norway has illustrated in its work to facilitate political solutions for Afghanistan, Israel/Palestine, Colombia and Sri Lanka, it doesn’t hurt to try. As a minor military player, Canada’s comparative advantage is in diplomatic not military solutions.

A crucial next step for Canada is Iran. The Harper government is extremely negative in its opinion of Iran. Canada severed relations and closed the Canadian embassy in Tehran in September 2012. This is a concern. Iran is an influential player in the conflicts in both Iraq and Syria, and Canada doesn’t even have a line of communication with it. Iran has a huge stake in the fight against IS and it is providing and/or training many of the ground forces, although not in coordination with the West. The Kurds and the Iranian-backed forces in Iraq are the most effective boots on the ground.

While Iran is a theocracy and is not known for its respect for human rights, it has an educated population, fairly competitive elections (at least in comparison to elsewhere in the region) and, ironically, higher approval ratings for the West than other countries in the Middle East.23 The Cabinet of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has more people with doctorates from US universities than the Cabinet of President Barack Obama – and Rouhani himself got a doctorate in Scotland.24 As the United States and Iran negotiate about nuclear weapons, Canada should start dialling down the rhetoric and pay more attention to Iran, even if this is strongly opposed by Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Harper government finds Iran unsavoury for religious and political reasons, and for its unhelpful interference in the Middle East in general25 – and yet Canada just announced a huge military sale to Saudi Arabia, a country about which the exact same accusations could be made.26 Improved relations between the United States and Iran are much more likely than the development of a stable, prosperous Iraq in the near future. If Canada is interested in increasing trade in the Middle East, Iran has a population of about 77.5 million compared to 33 million in Iraq (as constituted now). If the United States can deal with Iran, Canada should be able to as well.

In conclusion, airstrikes may work – although there is significant evidence that they do not, and indeed that airstrikes and drone strikes lead to radicalization – and military training and non-lethal military assistance may also work, but they should not be the bulk of the strategy to fight IS. The current approach taken by Canada – the “least bad alternative” as Juneau calls it (p. 1) – is not good enough. It is in Canada’s long-term interest to end the appeal of religious extremists of all stripes. This takes a bit more subtlety than an airstrike. If we want to reduce the attraction

26 Indeed, the religious beliefs of IS have many similarities with the Wahhabi and Salafi religious strain in Saudi Arabia, and private Saudi citizens provided (and perhaps still provide) significant funding for IS.
that IS and similar groups hold, Canada and the West in general need to have a long-term strategy. Any strategy to counter IS must include facilitating a political solution to end the conflict in Syria. Until that happens it is crucial to make sure that the four million Syrian refugees have livelihoods, education and hope in order to prevent them from becoming the next generation of violent extremists. And countries like Canada must ensure that Muslim populations don’t feel marginalized and persecuted, and thus aren’t drawn to join extremist groups.
About the Author

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