Interview with Andrew Wilkie MP on Australia’s decision to reject US request for military support.
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http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/andrew-wilkie-on-australia’s-
decision/7087988

Q How long is it that Australia has expressed an independent view re US request for military support?

A A very long time. One of the refreshing things about this decision is that it is showing a little bit of independence - understanding that we have a close relationship with the US, we can say no sometimes. Indeed we would have more influence in Washington if we did say no sometimes, because then the US wouldn’t be able to take us for granted. Regrettably since 2002/2003 when we joined in the invasion of Iraq, the US has taken us for granted. This is a good decision by the Turnbull government.

Q Are you saying that Prime Minister Turnbull doesn’t necessarily see Australia as the US deputy sheriff throughout the region?

A We shouldn’t make too much of this one decision – it is refreshing decision – a good decision – but we need to see a pattern in behaviour before we can have any confidence that the Turnbull government might carved out a more independent foreign and security policy. Putting aside our bilateral relationship with Washington for the moment – talking about the merits of this decision – it’s a good decision. We shouldn’t have gone to the Middle East in 2003 – we shouldn’t still be in the Middle East – and to decide not to increase / reinforce are presence in the Middle East is a sound decision. What the Turnbull government should be doing is laying out a roadmap for our withdrawal from that region because at the end of the day, we are deeply involved in taking sides in a civil war.

Q There are no signs of an exit strategy and we are still involved in the Middle East. If the US come up with a more credible strategy to defeat ISIS, couldn’t we see Australia then reconsidering this decision and increasing our military support for the region?

A I think you’ve touched on two quite different points there. One is for the US to come up with a better plan because clearly their current plan isn’t working. There has been precious little progress in Iraq and in Syria, so the current strategy is not working. There is a lot of pressure on the US president to come up with a better response to what’s going on there. Quite separate is what Australia should do. Yes, we helped create this mess by joining in the invasion of Iraq, destabilising that country, helping to create the security vacuum, that is now being back-filled by Islamic State (IS) and other trouble-makers. By our diplomatic support for the Syrian rebels which included IS, we helped create this mess.

But really the only way forward from here is to allow this civil war to run its course. If there should be any foreign intervention in those countries it really should be the Middle East, Islamic countries – they’re the only people who should be contributing to it now in a practical way.
Q  But those countries in the region are showing no signs of getting more involved in trying to defeat IS – the US Defence Secretary Ash Carter had asked coalition countries to increase their contributions in the wake of the Paris terror attacks – and just this week, we have had the suicide bombings in Turkey. Why wasn’t it a reasonable request to do more to wipe out ISIS at its source and stop it running amok as you put it?

A  There seems to be a misunderstanding or a refusal to understand the essence of what is going on in the Middle East. It’s a civil war. Yes, it has a deeply religious dimension, but ... it is a civil war - and the degree to which it is breaking out from the Middle East – let’s take the terrible atrocity in Paris – that wasn’t the IS trying to set up a state in France – that was the IS responding to French foreign and security policy.

The French have something like 10,000 soldiers deployed overseas, in particular in West Africa, Central Africa. They have 3,000 soldiers in Iraq. First and foremost, what happened in Paris was a response to French foreign policy – just as the first Bali bombing was a response to Australia joining in the bombing of Afghanistan. The second Bali bombing was a response to Australia joining in the invasion of Iraq. At the end of the day, we need to be very mindful, first and foremost, of Australia’s national interest. Our national interest will be best served by Australia getting out of the Middle East.

Q  To take us back to the announcement made last night by Defence Minister Marise Payne. She says the government will consider additional humanitarian support to be delivered by Australian aircraft which are already in the Middle East. Now you’ve previously said that the RAAF had become a gun-runner for the Kurds when it was supplying munitions. Would you support our planes being used for humanitarian assistance?

A  I’m the first to argue for greater Australian nation-building assistance – foreign development aid assistance – anywhere in the world where it can be delivered safely and where we can afford to do it ... whether that is in the ME or South East Asia, we should be doing that. W should be ramping up our foreign aid – because it must be done safely – and the idea that there be Globemasters and Hercules aircraft flying low at night dropping pallets of food and risking been shot down – that of course isn’t an option. We shouldn’t be putting our armed forces in harm’s way as some people have suggested. But where we can deliver nation-building and foreign aid and humanitarian aid safely – we should be doing it – doing more of it.

Q  Overall the issue is still being debated in this country. We have just heard the former Defence Minister Kevin Andrews on AM. He says the US request for additional military support was reasonable and should have been given favourable consideration. Is he undermining the Prime Minister here?

A  Kevin Andrews is entitled to his opinion and as a former Defence Minister he brings a valuable contribution to the debate. I think he is wrong in this case. At the end of the day, I think it would be reinforcing defeat in the Middle East – it wouldn’t be recognising appropriately that this is a civil war in the Middle East and we shouldn’t have got involved in the first place – and having now got involved, we should be looking at a way to withdraw from the Middle East.
Not about Kevin Andrews but about the conservatives in the Liberal Party more broadly – they haven’t met a war they didn’t like. They couldn’t get into Iraq in 2003 quick enough, They’ve wanted to stay heavily involved in South Asia and the Middle East ever since. They need to understand that they helped create this mess and they need to understand that the risk from religious extremism that Australians now face is a direct result of their foreign and security policies since 2003 to this very day.

Q Andrew Wilkie, the conservatives within the Liberal Party have not prevailed on this issue. Malcolm Turnbull and his views have. Could the Prime Minister have some explaining to do when he meets Barack Obama in Washington next week?

A Yes, he will have some explaining to do, but it’s an explanation worth giving and I think it is one that Barack Obama is decent enough to understand.