

Abbott Government's Decision To Bomb Syria Should Be Revoked

by

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On September 9, Prime Minister Tony Abbott confirmed that Australia will extend its airstrikes in Iraq to ISIS targets in Syria.

This decision had been under consideration for a number of weeks. On August 21, Abbott announced that a "formal request" had been received from the US to join bombing missions in Syria. However, according to a Fairfax Media report on August 26, the driving force for the formal request came from the Prime Minister's office, not Washington.

Australian combat aircraft - six F/A-18 Hornets, a Wedgetail airborne control aircraft and a KC-30A tanker - have been conducting missions over Iraq since October last year. Since then, it has been reported that the RAAF has conducted about 700 sorties against ISIS forces in Iraq.

Following the PM's announcement, Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin, said that these RAAF aircraft would likely begin operations over eastern Syria within a week.

The PM's professed concerns

In making this announcement, the PM claimed: "There can be no stability and no end to the persecution and suffering in the Middle East until the Daesh death cult is degraded and ultimately destroyed. That's what our armed forces are doing in Iraq and we need to do it in Syria too."¹

He added: "It is simply the Daesh death cult which is doing so much damage in Iraq, which we are pledged to help to defend and we are exercising the right to collective self-defence under article 51 of the UN charter in striking Daesh in Syria."²

These statements lack all credibility.

Responsibility for the chaos in Iraq

In the first quote, Abbott professes a concern for "stability" in Iraq. But who was responsible for creating the instability in the first place? Although Abbott and his parliamentary colleagues deny it, the main factor responsible for the current chaos in Iraq was the US-led invasion in March 2003 and the subsequent occupation. Australia played a prominent part in these acts of aggression.

It is important to emphasise here that Abbott was a minister in former Prime Minister John Howard's cabinet when the decision to support the US-led invasion was made. Not to admit responsibility for the instability and sectarian violence that resulted is simply an exercise in duplicity.

As Iraqi commentators have said, allegiance to a sect, whether Shia or Sunni, was not a significant part of national consciousness in pre-invasion Iraq. Rather it was the US-led aggressors that destroyed Iraqi national identity and replaced it with sectarian and ethnic identities. This transformation started immediately after the invasion when the US imposed a Governing Council based on sectarian identity, a phenomenon new to Iraq.

Responsibility for the birth of ISIS

What about Abbott's professed concern for "the persecution and suffering" in Iraq and the Middle East perpetrated by ISIS? Again what Abbott and his parliamentary cronies continue to deny is the

fact that the chaos in Iraq that the US-led invasion and occupation created, also fostered the very sectarian strife that gave birth to ISIS. As the mainstream US Middle East analyst, former CIA official Graham Fuller, has said: "The United States did not plan the formation of ISIS, but its destructive interventions in the Middle East and the war in Iraq were the basic causes of the birth of ISIS".

Not to admit these truths renders Abbott's professed concerns hollow. It also compromises any effective strategy to defeat ISIS, which must be based upon defusing Shia-Sunni polarisation. As Fuller has also said: "ISIS is supported by many Sunnis who feel isolated by the Shiite government in Baghdad. ISIS was benefiting from the Shiite agenda of the [former Prime Minister Nouri al-] Maliki government. I hope with the departure of Maliki and his replacement by someone who will watch out for Sunni-Shiite balance, polarization in Iraq will diminish. This is the only way to get rid of ISIS, never militarily."³

Respect or disrespect for international law?

When politicians such as Abbott profess adherence to international law, it is instructive to be reminded of the Nuremberg judgment on prominent Nazis after WW2. This judgement described military aggression as the "the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole."⁴

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a classic example of military aggression. Australia under the Coalition was complicit in this war crime. The problem is that neither Abbott, nor Howard before him, have owned up to this, nor have they been held responsible for this breach of international law.

As Andrew Wilkie correctly points out, this act of aggression was compounded by the fact that Howard's "justification" for going to war was based on a lie, on the so-called existence of "weapons of mass destruction" which was contradicted by advice received from the government's own security agencies at the time.⁵

Also as journalist Brian Toohey has accurately stated, "Howard still refuses to express any regret for the invasion. He wrongly told Parliament on February 4, 2003 that the government "knows that Iraq still has chemical and biological weapons . . . that pose a real and unacceptable threat to the stability and security of our world."⁶

Having being part of a Coalition government that failed to comply with international law in 2003, we now have the spectacle of Abbott referring to "the right to collective self-defence under article 51 of the UN charter" to justify RAAF bombing missions in Syria.

So apparently it is acceptable to appeal to the UN Charter to justify the intensification of military action in Syria today while it was also acceptable to wilfully ignore the very same UN Charter back in 2003.

The decision to bomb ISIS targets in Syria has been described by Australian legal experts as "problematic" and "a legal grey area." The Independent Federal MP, Andrew Wilkie, however, has been unequivocal. He stressed that there was "no UN imprimatur for Australia to bomb in the sovereign state of Syria" and condemned the planned air strikes as "illegal" under international law. In commenting on this assessment, Professor of International Law at the University of Sydney, Ben Saul, described Wilkie's claim as "probably correct".⁷

While legal opinion may be divided on the subject, it is entirely predictable that these bombings, far from "degrading and ultimately destroying ISIS", will not only cause more civilian casualties, but will also anger the Syrian civilians in these ISIS dominated areas. For the most part, these captive communities loath ISIS, but they also resent being attacked by American and Australian bombs.

It can also be safely predicted that the Labor Party's lamentable support for the extension of RAAF strikes in Syria will be resented by the civilian population.

An incoherent strategy

Respected Middle East commentator, Patrick Cockburn, has described the US-led strategy in Iraq and Syria as an Alice in Wonderland strategy. He points out that the US and its allies, including Australia, want to destroy the ISIS monstrosity, but they are also opposing the forces within the region that are fighting ISIS. These forces include Iran and the armed wing of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the ground force that appears to have taken on ISIS in defence of the Kurdish Yazidis in northern Iraq. But these anti-ISIS forces are on America's terrorist list and so, by association, are on Australia's terrorist list as well.⁸

In his September 9 announcement, the PM stated that the decision to bomb Syria is "not an attempt to build a shining city on a hill" meaning that it is "not an attempt to build a Liberal pluralist market democracy overnight in the Middle East", even though it had apparently been attempted in Iraq since the 2003 invasion but "thus far it has not magnificently succeeded." The attempt to mislead the public here almost matches the deceit involved in taking Australia to war based on a lie.

For all the PM's affection for what he calls a "Liberal pluralist market democracy", it is an inconvenient fact that some of the most repressive regimes in the Middle East are allies of the US. Take Saudi Arabia for example. Saudi Arabia is dominated by a fundamentalist version of Islam known as Wahhabism. As a missionary state, it is dedicated to the spread of this extreme religious doctrine by establishing madrasas (schools) and mosques in the Middle East and around the world. Rich Saudis have been prime supporters of ISIS and other jihadists both financially and ideologically. ISIS, for its part, is an extremist offshoot of Wahhabism bent on restoring the premodern autocracy of the caliphate.⁹

So while Saudi Arabia is a major US ally and, by association, an ally of Australia too, the main enemies of ISIS within Iraq and Syria, such as Iran and the PKK, turn out to be our enemies as well. This is the source of the Coalition's (and Labor's) muddled and incoherent strategy.

An alternative strategy

Unlike the Coalition's propensity to uncritically back America's military incursions around the world, there is another strategy that Australia could adopt to further the cause of peace and stability. Such a strategy is based upon diplomacy and respect for the UN Charter and international law.

For starters, Australia could work with other nations and initiate a resolution in the UN Security Council which declares ISIS to be a threat to peace – which would very likely succeed – and assist with defining an array of measures to thwart its territorial spread. Such an initiative, backed by the international community, may offer a more effective response to ISIS than America's preference for unilateral military missions. It may also help to restore Australia's tarnished reputation in international forums.¹⁰

Resolving the crisis in Syria

There is no doubt that resolving the crisis in Syria will be extremely difficult. As Patrick Cockburn has pointed out, there are two international crises stemming from the catastrophic civil war in Syria. One involves the exodus of Syrian refugees arriving in Europe while the other involves the rapid expansion of ISIS which already controls half of Syria and is likely to extend its territorial gains in the short term.

Cockburn persuasively argues that in responding to the Syrian crisis, Russia is bound to be a leading player in both stopping ISIS, because it supplies the weapons to do so, and in negotiating a peace, because Assad must co-operate with Russia if he is to survive. Cockburn points out that "Moscow does not have the strength to bid for a hegemonic role in Syria or the Middle East, so this is not a moment for knee-jerk Cold War reactions."¹¹

Cockburn also emphasises that without the US co-operating with Russia to press their allies inside and outside Syria towards a settlement, the war will go on and the only winner will be ISIS and the al-Qaeda clones.¹²

In addition, the success of the recent international talks regarding Iran's nuclear program and the impact of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) may well result in more conciliatory relations between the US and Iran and thereby contribute to the negotiation of political settlements in crisis-torn Syria and Iraq.

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Notes

1 & 2. Tony Abbott, quoted in Peta Donald's report '[Labor agrees to support extension of Australian airstrikes into Syria](#)', ABC's *PM* program, Sep 9, 2015.

3. Graham Fuller, quoted in an interview entitled '[Former CIA officer says US policies helped create IS](#)', *Al-Monitor*, Sep 2, 2014.

4. Quoted in '[War of Aggression](#)', *Wikipedia*, accessed Sep 12, 2015.

5. News Report, '[Iraq crisis: John Howard's decision to back 2003 invasion helped fuel Islamic State militant group, says Andrew Wilkie](#)', *ABC News*, Sep 22, 2014.

6. Former PM John Howard, quoted in Brian Toohey's '[Howard holding out on crucial Iraq admission](#)', *Australian Financial Review*, Aug 16, 2014.

7. John Barron, '[Fact check: Is it illegal for Australia to bomb Islamic State in Syria?](#)', ABC, Sep 18, 2015. Refer also to Andrew Wilkie's '[Statement on bombing](#)', Federal Parliament, Sep 9, 2015.

8 & 9. Transcript of Aaron Maté's interview with Noam Chomsky, '[On How the Iraq War Birthed ISIS & Why U.S. Policy Undermines the Fight Against It](#)', *Democracy Now!* Mar 2, 2015. Also refer to Karen Armstrong, '[Wahhabism to ISIS: how Saudi Arabia exported the main source of global terrorism](#)', *New Statesman*, Nov 27, 2014.

10. Transcript of Laura Flanders' interview with Noam Chomsky, '[On ISIS, Ferguson, Activism, and Summer Camp](#)', *Telesur*, Dec 8, 2014.

11 & 12. Patrick Cockburn, '[Only a US-Russian agreement can spur a settlement in Syria](#)', *The Independent*, Sep 8, 2015.