

Strategic Motivations for Australian Military Intervention in the Middle East

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Abstract

Australia has once again sent its armed forces to join a military coalition in the Middle East, this time as part of the international intervention against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. This continues a pattern of Australian participation in Middle Eastern military interventions over the past century. Apart from the role played by Australian forces in the World Wars as part of the British Imperial forces, Australia has also participated in ongoing United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) in the Middle East; these actions were generally justified by the aims of upholding the global order and international law.

Motivations for Australian involvement in the post-Cold War US-led multinational interventions in Iraq have been more controversial. The UN-authorised Operation Desert Storm in 1990-91 saw a small participation by the Australian Defence Forces (ADF). The US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq from 2003 had a larger involvement by Australian forces in a deployment that was both domestically and internationally controversial.

The participation of the ADF in these US-led interventions in the Middle East raises the important issue of whether these missions were largely symbolic; primarily executed to secure the US alliance, rather than pursuing any direct purpose in upholding Australia's direct national security interests. Involvement in the wars in Iraq arguably made Australians less safe, exposing them to a higher level of terrorist threat. The general lack of transparency and public accountability for how Australian governments decide to go to war is another troubling legacy of these deployments.

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Australia and British Imperial Involvement in the Middle East

Australia's first military deployment to the Middle East region was its contribution to the 1885 Sudan Expedition, a minor role in the British Empire's war to suppress the *Madhist* revolt. The colonial government sent a volunteer contingent of an infantry battalion and an artillery battery in March 1885, motivated as an expression of Imperial loyalty, and out of recognition that the defence of the Australian colonies was entirely dependent on being part of the British Empire. The NSW contingent was only involved in some minor skirmishes with the Sudanese *Madhist* rebel forces, and spent most of its time on railway guard duty (Alomes, 1988: 321-322).

The contingent returned from its brief deployment in June, with most of the small number of casualties due to illness. The Sudan Expedition thus turned out to be a largely tokenistic endeavour, although it was exploited by authorities in both Sydney and London as an expression of Imperial patriotism. This pioneering effort therefore provided a historical precedent for later military interventions, of supporting the interests of a larger coalition ally, even though there was no direct security threat to Australia (Burke, 2008:30-31).

With the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, although an independent Dominion since its Federation in 1901, Australian foreign and defence policy was still effectively subservient to Britain; and therefore Australia automatically committed its forces to the Imperial war effort, with its expeditionary forces named the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). The AIF's ANZAC Corp, after training in Egypt, deployed in the Gallipoli campaign invading the Turkish Ottoman Empire, landing at what would become known as Anzac Cove on April 25th, 1915. The ANZAC Corps suffered over 8,000 fatal casualties in the strategically inept campaign, before being withdrawn in January 1916 (Carlyon, 2006:28).

Despite ending in failure, the Gallipoli campaign soon became one of the core symbols of Australian nationalism, promoted by successive governments ever since. The extent to which this near-mythic sense of patriotic discourse has been carried on to the present day can be seen in the extent to which enormous effort has been expended on the 100th anniversary commemorations of the Anzac Day landings, with up to \$325 million being spent by the Commonwealth government, more than any other country's Great War ceremonial observances (Brown, 2014).

Following the Gallipoli campaign, most of the AIF was then directed to the Western Front. However, the AIF's cavalry forces, particularly the Australian Light Horse, spent the remainder of the war in the Middle East as part of the Palestine campaign, during 1916-18. Australian forces took part in a number of notable actions, particularly a dramatic cavalry charge at the Battle of Beersheba, preliminary to participating in the taking of Jerusalem from Turkish forces in December 1917. The AIF then played a role in the taking of Damascus in 1918, alongside the famous Arab revolt coordinated by T.E. Lawrence. Far from tokenistic in this instance, Australian military forces made a significant contribution to the British Empire's hegemony in the Middle East; this of course had post-war geopolitical ramifications which would resonate throughout the 20th century (Trumpener, 2014: 90).

As with the Great War, the Second World War saw Australia again automatically commit its forces to the war effort of the British Empire. The 2nd AIF was raised, and first attached again to the Middle Eastern theatre, where the 6th Division joined the Western Desert campaign against the forces of Fascist Italy in Libya. After contributing to the capture of Bardia, Tobruk, and Benghazi from November 1940 to January 1941, the 6th Division was then transferred to Greece, from where it was eventually evacuated, and again from Crete, after the German invasion in April-May 1941 (Labanca, 2015: 87-89).

The 9th Division was in Tobruk when it was besieged by Rommel's Afrika Korp from April 1941, along with the 18th Brigade of the 7th Division. Nicknamed the 'Rats of Tobruk' by Nazi propaganda, the AIF forces played the primary role in successfully repelling a number of German attacks, before being gradually relieved from August to October (Badman, 1988: 90-108). Meanwhile, in June-July 1941, the remainder of the 7th Division played a major role in an often - overlooked campaign, the invasion of Lebanon and Syria, against the Axis-aligned *Vichy* French forces (Beevor, 2012: 176-179).

With the outbreak of war in the Pacific from December 1941, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) government led by Prime Minister John Curtin insisted on the return of most of the AIF for the defence against Japan, with the 6th and 7th Divisions being recalled in early 1942, overriding the preference of Winston Churchill and the Imperial General Staff to divert them to the defence of Burma. The 9th Division remained in the Middle East, fighting in the decisive Battle of El Alamein in October-November 1942, before also being brought back to Australia, to serve in the Pacific theatre (Ham, 2004: 87-93).

Some Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) squadrons and Royal Australian Navy (RAN) ships would remain to serve in the Mediterranean theatre, but the bulk of Australian forces were now committed to Australia's core strategic area of operations. With the fall of Singapore in February 1942, leading to the capture of the 8th AIF Division, which would endure a brutal captivity under the Japanese Imperial forces, Britain could no longer provide for Australia's defence. That role would shift to Australia's new primary ally, the United States, a security relationship that remains dominant to this day (Griffiths, 1993:10-11).

Australia and United Nations Involvement in the Middle East

Australia was a founding member of the United Nations in 1945, and the ADF has had a long tradition of participation in UNPKOs. The earliest of these began in the Middle East, and while not an original contributor since their inception, Australia soon came to be a regular participant to these missions, which were primarily small groups of unarmed observers, sent to monitor truces and ceasefires.

Australian participation in UNTSO, one of the earliest PKOs, began in 1956, supervising the ceasefire lines between Israel and Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. ADF observers have served tours of duty in UNTSO on its various fronts in complementary sub-missions to the present day. The ADF has participated in UNDOF, on the Golan Heights since 1974; the MFO in the Sinai, since 1973, including RAAF helicopter units; and UNIFIL in Lebanon since 1978, during

which there has been one ADF fatality. Australian peacekeepers also contributed observers to UNYOM in Yemen, in 1962-63; a substantial ongoing mission by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) to UNIFCYP in Cyprus since 1964, where 3 fatalities have been suffered; and to supervise the Iran-Iraq War ceasefire in UNIIMOG, in 1988-90 (Australian Senate, 2008: 4-5).

As part of the UN PKO system, as outlined in the UN Charter, and approved by UN Security Council resolutions, these operations have been the most legitimate of Australia's Middle Eastern interventions, with the objectives of upholding international law. The ADF was also involved in a controversial, and ultimately unsuccessful PKO in the Horn of Africa in Somalia, with an infantry battalion serving in UNOSOM, in 1993-94, suffering one fatality while attempting to secure famine aid relief delivery (Australian Senate, 2008: 8-9).

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Hawke Labor government threw in its support for Operation Desert Storm, the UN-authorized and US-led coalition to repel Iraq's invasion. A relatively small naval task force of three RAN warships was sent, with a small number of officers serving on exchange in staff and Headquarter positions. In the post-war instability that continued after the liberation of Kuwait, an ADF medical team was sent to the UN-protected Kurdish autonomous zone to aid refugees (Cantwell, 2012: 24).

Australian involvement in the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91 had legitimacy under international law, being an intervention authorised by the UN Security Council. However, the war had a deeply problematic outcome, with the 'Iraqi question' remaining unresolved, proving to be the beginning of Australia's participation in the long-running saga of US intervention in Iraq. The moral dilemmas of this intervention soon became apparent, with the RAN participating in the post-war UN-authorized blockade of Iraq, enforcing economic sanctions aimed at securing Iraqi participation in WMD inspections. These sanctions were criticised for having a disproportionate effect on the civilian population of Iraq. The Australian Wheat Board, a government-authorized wheat export marketing body, was also later implicated in the UN's 'oil for food' sanctions-busting scandal, although a legal inquiry held in 2006 exonerated any government, ministers, including Prime Minister John Howard, for lack of evidence (Cole Inquiry, 2006: 61-62, 115).

Australia and American Intervention in the Middle East: Afghanistan and Iraq

With *al-Qaeda's* terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, the Howard government immediately invoked the ANZUS treaty with the US for the first time, pledging full support (Prime Minister Howard had been visiting Washington at the time). The ADF joined US forces in the initial invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, to overthrow the Taliban government, with the Special Air Service (SAS) particularly involved in the Battle of Tora Bora, which narrowly missed capturing Osama bin Laden. This was the beginning of what would become the longest and costliest military operation for Australia since the Vietnam War, an involvement which remains ongoing. A 1500-strong ADF task force was withdrawn from Afghanistan in 2002, in part to prepare for participation in the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 (Brangwin & Rann, 2010).

While the Afghan deployment did have perceived legitimacy under international law, being an operation originally aimed at eliminating an international terrorist threat, Australia's involvement in the Iraq War was far more controversial, both internationally and domestically. The Howard Coalition government supported the justification of the Bush administration unquestioningly, that Iraq's Baathist regime was developing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), and was allied to *al-Qaeda*. This was questioned by whistleblower Lt. Col. Andrew Wilkie, who resigned from the Office of National Assessments (ONA) intelligence analysis agency in protest (Wilkie later became an independent member of parliament). While the Opposition Labor Party had backed the deployment of the ADF to Afghanistan, it refused to give bipartisan support to the invasion of Iraq (Wilkie, 2014).

Australian involvement in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 again comprised three RAN warships, this time with the addition of 500 Special Forces, and 14 F/A-18 fighter aircraft. Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, an ADF stabilisation force was deployed in 2005-2008 in the relatively stable Shi'ite dominated Al Muthanna province in southern Iraq, providing security for a Japanese Self Defense Force (JSDF) reconstruction team. A security team was also maintained to protect diplomatic staff in Baghdad. The nature of this deployment meant that the ADF in Iraq was under relatively less risk than US and other allied forces, with only three Australians killed in action. Following the election of the Rudd Labor government in 2007, the ALP fulfilled its election promise, withdrawing the ADF from Iraq by 2009 (Corcoran, 2014).

In 2004, as the Taliban insurgency began to intensify after its initial overthrow, the ADF was returned to Afghanistan by the Howard Coalition government, to join the US-led International Stabilisation Forces (ISAF) aiding the Afghan government. This would come to comprise regular rotations of Special Forces and other combat units, backed by a 'reconstruction task force', termed Operation Slipper, based in Uruzgan province, at a typical strength of around 1,500 personnel. Serving initially under Dutch, then US command, over 33,000 ADF personnel would end up serving in Afghanistan, suffering 41 killed in action, with 261 wounded, many seriously (not counting hundreds more suffering Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, with over 100 veteran suicides, and up to 3,000 veterans becoming homeless), as a result of extensive combat operations against the Taliban over nearly ten years. Having originally received UN authorisation, unlike Iraq, the war in Afghanistan maintained bipartisan support from the ALP. The total cost of Australia's involvement in Afghanistan has been at least \$10 billion (Hyland, 2015).

The ADF combat task force was finally withdrawn from its base at Tarin Kowt at the end of 2013 by the new Abbott Coalition government. 400 personnel remained as an advisory training and counter-terrorist team based in Kabul. These were meant to be withdrawn after the end of 2014, with the official end of ISAF's combat mission. However, these ADF advisors are remaining with the residual US/NATO forces, which have had their mission extended by the Obama administration to at least 2016, and potentially beyond (McNally and Bucala, 2015).

On this basis, Afghanistan appears to be another strategic failure, with Australia's major motivation being to yet again to secure its alliance with the US, while making a largely tokenistic, yet still costly contribution to coalition warfare. Despite its best efforts and sacrifices, the failure of ADF to enable long-term stability and security in Uruzgan is symbolic of the wider failure of ISAF to defeat the Taliban insurgency. This repeats a historic pattern of folly in Australian foreign policy, with the precedent of the Vietnam War (Meek, 2014).

Following Australia's involvement in the Iraq War, which was launched on the basis of faulty intelligence deliberately manipulated by the Bush Administration, resulting in a shattered country, a destabilised region, and a humanitarian catastrophe, a group of academics, and former senior diplomats, public servants and military commanders formed the Australians for War Powers Reform advocacy group, calling for a review of the war powers of Australian governments (Broinowski, 2012). The decision to go to war is effectively in the unilateral hands of the executive, the Cabinet, with no real requirement for the approval of parliament, and with certainly no real mechanism of accountability or choice of the wider public. The lack of transparency in Australia's war powers, particularly if the decision has bipartisan political support (effectively sidelining opposition from Independent MPs, and minor parties such as the Greens) was revealed yet again in Australia's latest contribution to a US-led military coalition intervening in the Middle East.

War Against *Da'esh*/Islamic State (IS)

The Abbott Coalition government was one of the first to pledge military support to the US-led coalition against *Da'esh* (also known as Islamic State [IS]; Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS]; & Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant [ISIL]), the Sunni-based Islamist insurgency based in Iraq and Syria. Emerging out of groups of radicalised Baathist insurgents following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, *Da'esh* took advantage of the chaos wrought by the civil war in neighbouring Syria from 2011 to replenish its organisation. International concern over the rise of *Da'esh* followed its dramatic offensive in northern Iraq in the summer of 2014, where around 1,000 insurgents took the city of Mosul, and saw widespread atrocities and war crimes committed against routed Iraqi government forces, Shi'ites, and other minority groups (Reuter, 2015).

In October 2014, the Abbott government committed the deployment of around 600 ADF personnel to Iraq, including 200 Special Forces advisers; and 8 F/A-18 'Super Hornets', which were soon carrying out airstrikes against *Da'esh*, supported by three refuelling/transport aircraft. This latest Australian intervention has a greater degree of legitimacy under international law, compared to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, since it is at the request of the sovereign government of Iraq, and due to the danger posed by *Da'esh*, which has notoriously executed hostages, among the many atrocities and war crimes it has perpetuated. The large number of foreign fighters which have joined *Da'esh* has included at least 100 Australians (out of potentially up to 20,000 foreign fighters) providing another justification claimed by the Abbott government to support ADF involvement alongside US forces, and other coalition members (Switzer, 2015).

However, as with Australia's involvement in the 2003 Iraq War, there is the danger that joining this latest US-led coalition will only aggravate any potential terrorist threat to Australia. Similarly to the first Iraq War, the intervention against *Da'esh* is not popular with the public, with a recent poll indicating only 36% support the return of the ADF to Iraq (Essential, 2015). In measures to counter the threat of Australians fighters returning radicalised by *Da'esh*, the Abbott government, again with largely unquestioning bipartisan support from Labor, introduced legislation in February 2015 which intensified the counter-terrorism powers obtained in the wake of the 'War on Terror' since 2001. New restrictions were replaced on travel to areas of Iraq and Syria, and laws to retain Australian's 'metadata' by security authorities, and to punish journalists and public servants revealing 'secret operations' have been recently passed, despite concerns this will do little to protect against terrorism, but instead erodes the civil liberties of all Australians (Sparrow, 2015).

Following an Iraqi government counteroffensive against *Da'esh* in Tikrit in March 2015, controversially aided by Shi'ite militias covertly backed by Iran, Abbott's Cabinet confirmed an increase of around 330 more ADF troops to replace the 200 Special Forces in their training and advisory role, to be joined by 143 advisers from New Zealand, to be deployed in June. It is estimated that this latest 'building partner capacity initiative' will last at least two years; Abbott has refused to comment on whether further escalations will occur in future. The new additional deployment will raise the cost of Australia's involvement in Iraq (and potentially Syria) to at least \$400 million. It will make the ADF mission the second-largest of the coalition partners, after the US forces. Canada has announced it will join US airstrikes against *Da'esh* in Syria, so this leads to the question of whether the RAAF will also follow suit? Super Hornet strikes have so far been limited to *Da'esh* targets in Iraq, although refuelling flights in support of US aircraft for sorties in Syria are already taking place (Griffiths, 2015).

Conclusions: Implications and Legacies of Australian Intervention in the Middle East

Having joined the US-led 'Global War on Terror' since 2001, the ADF has effectively been at constantly been at war ever since, even if this is not often in the public's awareness. Joining the campaign against *Da'esh* continues Australia's participation in a seemingly perpetual use of armed force, on behalf of its primary ally, the US. Renewed ADF participation in Iraq is thus the latest episode in a long failed history of external training of the Iraqi Army by numerous countries (including Iran) and private military contractors, since the 2003 invasion by the US. Iraq and Syria remain a local and regional humanitarian catastrophe, but *not* a direct national security threat to the US, much less Australia. US-led intervention will be marginal at best in contributing to the containment and eventual decline of *Daesh*, which is ultimately the responsibility and burden of Iraq and Syria's own fragile and traumatised political structures and processes. In a recent speech by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop on the rise of *Da'esh*, there was no acknowledgement of role of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 in its formation, instead blaming the 'Arab Spring' since 2010 for its emergence. This demonstrates a fundamental ignorance, bordering on arrogance, by Australia's political

leadership regarding the security of the Middle East, with concerning implications for implementing effective strategy towards it (Keane, 2015).

Based on the historical record, the strategic impetus of Australian participation in Middle East military interventions has predominantly been to support its primary allies: first the British Empire, then the US. Australia's postwar participation in UN PKOs/interventions has at least had the motivation of supporting the UN-based system of international law and security, which gave them a greater measure of legitimacy.

Overall though, most interventions in the Middle East have arguably *not* been in Australia's direct national security or strategic interests, and have been a harmful distraction from Australia's main area of strategic and diplomatic concern, the Asia-Pacific region. Apart from the material and human costs of Australia's involvement in war in the Middle East, joining the recent US-led interventions has also put Australians at greater risk of terrorist attack. The history of Australian military intervention in the Middle East also raises ongoing concerns over the relative lack of transparency and accountability in the decision making processes of Australian governments in sending the ADF to war.

There has been relatively little discussion and debate in parliament, much less in public, on the reasons for going to war; no public inquiries have been made into the decision process and motivations for going to war in Iraq and Afghanistan; and no official histories of the wars are being commissioned as yet, which could examine these questions. As Australian forces continue to be engaged in combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and potentially Syria, this troubling legacy seems set to be tragically perpetuated into the near future.

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