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The Ottawa Shooting

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Canada's Conservative government has proclaimed that Canada and Canadian democracy are under terrorist assault.

This is not just exaggeration or sensationalism; it is a lie. The government, aided by the media, is promoting this false narrative to provide it with a pretext to implement a dramatic lurch to the right in Canada's foreign and domestic policy.

The government's immediate goals are twofold: to delegitimize and silence popular opposition to the new US-led war in the Middle East so that Canada's role can be expanded, and to rush through legislation giving further powers to the national security apparatus.

Wednesday's events in Ottawa—the killing of a soldier on guard at the National War Memorial and a subsequent shootout in the center block of Canada's parliament buildings—were the actions of a lone, misguided and deeply disturbed individual. So too was the killing two days before of another member of Canada's armed forces who was run over while walking in the parking lot of a St. Jean-sur-Richelieu Quebec shopping mall by a recent radicalized convert to Islam.

Neither assailant belonged to a “homegrown terrorist group,” let alone Al Qaeda, ISIS or some other foreign-based terrorist organization. Police have concluded the attackers did not know each

other and that the two killings were entirely separate events, although it is not inconceivable that the St. Jean-sur-Richelieu killing helped motivate the Ottawa shooter.

Despite the absence of a terrorist plot, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his government are determined to depict Canada as being under siege.

Following Monday's hit-and-run attack, Harper and the Prime Minister's Office rushed to take center stage. In a radical break with Canadian norms, Harper, not the police, made public that there had been a possible "terrorist" attack. It was his aides who continued to be the media's principal source of information about the police-intelligence investigation.

In a nationally televised address Wednesday evening—long after it was evident that the morning's shooting spree in Ottawa had been the work of a lone individual—Harper attempted to strike a Churchillian pose, asserting that Canada would vanquish the terrorists who had attacked it and threatened its "values" and democracy. This included a gratuitous reference to the war in the Middle East. Harper vowed his government would "redouble" its efforts to work with Canada's military-strategic partners to deny terrorists "safe haven" anywhere in the world.

Harper's attempt to cast himself as the defender of democracy would be laughable were the stakes not so serious. His government has effectively abolished the right to strike for federal employees and federally-regulated workers and baldly asserted the state's right to spy on Canadians' electronic communications at will. In December 2008, he carried out what amounted to a constitutional coup, prevailing on the unelected governor-general to use the undemocratic powers of that office to shut down parliament so as to prevent MPs from voting to bring down his government.

The scenario that played out in Ottawa this past week is one that has by now become all too familiar. Time and again since September 11, 2001, governments have seized on terrorist acts and scares to push through a predetermined reactionary political agenda.

The 9/11 attacks became the pretext for the administration of George W. Bush to mount wars of aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq and launch a wholesale assault on Americans' democratic rights. Canada quickly followed suit, passing its own draconian anti-terrorism law, embarking on a military rearmament program, and taking a leading role in the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

The push for changes of an equal or even greater import is already underway.

The government had been set on Wednesday to unveil controversial amendments to Canada's 2001 Anti-Terrorism Act that would give the security agencies new powers, including the integration of their surveillance of Canadians still more closely with the US National Security Agency (NSA) and other foreign intelligence services. Now, hoping to exploit the climate of fear and nationalism it has stoked up over this week's attacks, the government has signaled it will postpone the amendments' introduction so it can rewrite them to give the security forces still greater powers. The revised amendments will reportedly include enhanced powers to

preventatively arrest terrorist suspects—that is, to detain people without charge on the mere suspicion that they may commit an illegal act in the future.

While the Conservatives have made no fresh announcements about Canada’s role in the new Mideast war, Canada’s military and corporate media have been urging the government to “level” with Canadians and announce that Canada’s combat mission will last longer than the current six months. They have also been clamouring for the government to match its bellicose rhetoric against Russia, Iran and other states with a huge increase in military spending.

To reject the false, politically motivated claims of a Canada under terrorist assault is not to argue that the phenomenon of “homegrown” terrorism is entirely fabricated. But insofar as there is a greater danger to Canadians or people in the US, Europe and Australia from disorientated individuals influenced by jihadist propaganda from ISIS, Al Qaeda and their ilk, the responsibility lies with the governments and ruling elites of the imperialist powers—Canada included.

The imperialist powers have wrought destruction and social devastation across the predominantly Muslim Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia with their wars, drone strikes, patronage of military dictatorships and monarchs, and IMF “structural adjustments” plans.

In pursuit of their predatory interests, they have built up, used and manipulated Islamist forces for decades. Sometimes, as in the case of Iraq and Syria today, they have served as the pretext for launching new wars aimed at advancing US geo-strategic interests. More often, they have been used as imperialist proxies.

The Taliban and Al Qaeda emerged as a result of Washington’s organizing and arming of Islamic fundamentalists to fight the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan. ISIS is a product of the 2003 US-British invasion and occupation of Iraq, which led to a million deaths, the US’s stoking of sectarian animosities in Iraq as part of its divide-and-rule strategy, and its use of sectarian Islamist forces as proxy armies in its wars for regime-change in Libya and Syria.

US Vice-President Joe Biden recently blurted out that Washington’s staunch allies, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, had poured money and arms into ISIS as part of their Sunni-sectarian conflict with Iran.

Canada, under Liberal and Conservative governments alike, has been a partner in these crimes. It has played a major role in the Afghan and Libyan wars; staunchly supported Israel, including its recent aggression against the Palestinians in Gaza; defended Mubarak’s dictatorship and the military’s return to power in Egypt in 2013, provided arms to Saudi Arabia... the list goes on and on.

Even the corporate media has noted that Canadian bombs may soon be raining down in Iraq on many of the same Islamist fighters with whom the Canadian Armed Forces coordinated its Libyan bombing campaign in 2011 and whom Ottawa championed as “freedom fighters” both in Libya and in Syria.

The intensification of imperialist predations overseas goes hand in and hand with the promotion of militarism, destruction of democratic rights and implementation of a right-wing social agenda at home. Canada, like all the imperialist powers, has seen a massive growth in social inequality and economic insecurity over the past quarter century. Since 2008, the assault on public services, pensions, jobless benefits and other social rights has been dramatically intensified.

Within such an officially cultivated environment of reaction it is not surprising that perverse political appeals and ideologies can find adherents, especially among the marginalized and the disoriented.

The Ottawa shooter, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, had struggled with drug addictions for years and as a result had had frequents run-ins with the law. He was living in a homeless shelter in the final days of his life. His father, a Libyan-Canadian businessman, is believed to have been active in a jihadist militia that participated in the 2011 imperialist-backed insurgency against the Gaddafi regime.

Because their class agenda of war and austerity is inimical to the interests of the vast majority, the rulers of Canada, like their counterparts in the US and the other imperialist powers, are bringing home the authoritarian and violent methods they have always employed in Asia, Africa and Latin America.