

Tony Abbott shows leadership in grasping nettle of Islamic State terrorism

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Australia could deploy up to 24 Super Hornets in any US-led action against IS. Picture: Craig Barrett/ADF Source: Supplied



Count on us: Tony Abbott with Barack Obama in Washington in June. Source: News Corp Australia

THE Abbott government could deploy up to 24 Super Hornet aircraft in ground attack roles, two or three of five airborne early warning and control aircraft to co-ordinate allied aircraft and some contingent of the special forces on the ground, if it decides to make a military contribution in Iraq.

No decision has yet been made about whether Australian forces will participate in any military action the US may take in Iraq, or down the track in Syria. But Australian military leaders are in deep and continuous dialogue with their American counterparts about what

Australia may do and can do. They are in the process of furnishing precise options for the Abbott government to consider if and when the Americans make a request for help. Tony Abbott told parliament this week: “We have all seen atrocity after atrocity on our TV screens — beheadings, crucifixions, mass executions. This is as near to pure evil as we are ever likely to see. President Obama pointed out what is at risk in northern Iraq is potential genocide — a humanitarian catastrophe on a scale unparalleled in recent times.

“Now, to his great credit, President Obama has authorised air strikes against the murderous hordes of ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, now calling itself just the Islamic State). Those air strikes have lifted the siege of Mount Sinjar. They have apparently stopped the advance of ISIL forces into Kurdish areas.

“There are obviously discussions going on between the United States and its friends and allies about what more can be done to avert further disasters in this part of the world. I have to say that Australia has not been officially asked for military assistance.

“Should we be asked, we would want to look at any request in the light of achievable objectives, a clear role for Australian forces, a full risk assessment, and an overall humanitarian objective.”

During the week, the Prime Minister also issued a statement saying: “Australia is not considering putting combat forces on the ground (nor, for that matter, is the United States).” However, this does not rule out the use of Australian special forces. By definition, special forces are not general ground combat forces. They have special roles, which may involve surveillance, intelligence gathering, recovery of personnel or sometimes targeted strikes on terrorist leaders.

Overall, the Abbott government is making a considered, complex, many-layered, whole of government response both to the strategic challenges of the desperate developments of the Middle East and the danger of terrorism emerging out of the renewed Middle East conflicts and the emergence of the Islamic State.

The many different parts of this response need to be separated out to be evaluated properly. There are both the big picture geo-strategic and geopolitical considerations. As part of this there is the potential Australian military involvement. There is also a set of international diplomatic tasks.

Then there are purely domestic measures, ranging from greater funding for domestic intelligence and law enforcement agencies, new anti-terror laws, a new group of 80 Border Security officers for airports, and a series of measures to engage and reassure the Muslim community and related measures to target young Muslim men regarded as being at risk of radicalisation.

It is a formidable range of disparate but co-ordinated measures. They have not been implemented, co-ordinated or explained perfectly, but the net judgment is that this is an impressive mobilisation of resources across the capacity of the Australian government. It is a mobilisation undertaken to meet what the Abbott government believes are serious challenges to Australia’s national interests.

The most controversial element of the government’s response is likely to be the military component. However, Abbott has moved systematically and fairly comprehensively to include the Australian people in his thinking on this and he seems to have brought public opinion with him. Opposition Leader Bill Shorten is being sensibly bipartisan on such a critical issue.

The Abbott government is fully supportive of the direction of the Obama administration’s evolving policy response to the emergence of the Islamic State.

Abbott has taken to saying that the Middle East is a “witches’ brew of complexity and danger”. That is certainly true and that judgment underlies a wholly sympathetic Canberra response to Washington’s efforts to grapple with the unfolding strategic drama in Iraq and Syria.

The US has now mounted more than 100 air strikes against Islamic State targets. These strikes have achieved a series of positive outcomes. They have prevented the slaughter of large numbers of innocent human beings. They have also stopped the Islamic State’s advances on several fronts, limited its room for manoeuvre and begun to destroy the mystique of battle field invincibility which the Islamic State’s string of victories had built up.

But the group is still making gains in some parts of Iraq and in Syria. A great deal of the weaponry it captured from the Iraqi army has made its way into Syria.

Obama’s policy is continuing to evolve in a more forward leaning way. The President appears to believe, surely correctly, that a military response is necessary but not sufficient. On September 10, Iraq gets a new prime minister. This will be regarded as a more legitimate government than that run by the discredited Nouri al-Maliki.

A more broadly based Iraqi government is necessary to peel off what might be described as the Islamic State’s softer, or less committed, layers of support. These are basically the Sunni tribes who once fought against al-Qa’ida and the Baathist elements, especially the former military elements of Saddam Hussein’s regime, which once ran a secular regime (albeit a very repressive one) and opposed Islamist, jihadist extremism.

No one should think that Obama has yet made a firm decision, but after September 10, US policy is likely to move beyond its present two fairly restrictive settings — namely to use air strikes only to avoid humanitarian disaster or protect US personnel.

US policy appears to be moving towards a realisation that a campaign to destroy what Obama calls “the cancer” of the Islamic State will take months, perhaps many months. This will involve both the military destruction of the Islamic State and political, financial and security incentives to all Sunni elements not wholly committed to the Islamic State. Those not positively committed to the Islamic State are surely the vast majority of Iraqi Sunnis.

The Abbott government understands that any Australian response has to nestle within the US response. Nonetheless, Abbott has taken a position of political, strategic and even to some extent military leadership in this matter. He has spoken more clearly, earlier and more forcefully than other Western leaders. At his meeting with Obama in the White House in June, Abbott assured the President that if the US needed to get more militarily involved in Iraq it would do so with Australian help.

The Abbott government believes that US success is important not only in itself but because US credibility is a massive factor in Australian security. The nature of Iraq and Syria, and the terrain and location, dictate the broad outlines of a potential Australian contribution. Way back in 1998, the Clinton administration asked for Australian support for what it planned as a military operation against Saddam Hussein.

In the end, Washington decided not to go ahead with the action. But John Howard, prime minister at the time, was shocked to discover that he could not deploy the F111s, then Australia’s leading combat jets, because they did not have adequate electronic warfare and self-defence capacities and would have been vulnerable even to Iraqi air defences. This led Howard to offer, instead, the Australian SAS to act as the force to rescue any downed allied pilots in Iraq. This was not in the event necessary because that particular operation was not proceeded with by Clinton.

But the realisation of Australia’s limitations at the time, plus the searing experience of having an inadequate military to cover contingencies if things had got difficult in East Timor, led

Howard to embark on a decade of serious rebuilding of Australian defence capability. At the heart of that re-building has been hi-tech interoperability with the Americans. The kind of equipment we buy to be interoperable with the Americans also gives us a formidable independent capability.

The Super Hornets, as Defence Minister David Johnston pointed out on Lateline, are the same planes as fly off US aircraft carriers. But if the Australian Super Hornets go to Iraq they won't be flying off aircraft carriers. They are not equipped with the landing gear that makes that possible. Instead they would almost certainly operate from the Al Minhad base in the United Arab Emirates.

The way the Islamic State operates makes it vulnerable to air power. It would be possible to degrade if not destroy it from the air. Two months ago this would have been extremely straightforward as it was operating as a conventional army travelling in formations and speaking on radios and mobile phones. More recently, it has worked hard to integrate itself into urban areas and thereby raise the risk of civilian casualties to any force which attacks it.

However, when the Islamic State advances, it still does so in largely conventional military formations, which are extremely vulnerable to air attack. More importantly, the extraordinary technical advances of the last decade mean that allied targeting is now vastly more precise. Islamic State personnel would also be vulnerable to strikes by drones.

All such efforts would not solve the underlying problems of Iraq and Syria, but would greatly diminish the Islamic State.

As any operation unfolds Australian planes might move to bases in Iraq itself. The Super Hornets would be well equipped for any ground attack role. The AWACs act as a magnificent force multiplier by integrating vast amounts of data and directing allied planes precisely to targets. Australia could well deploy two or more AWACs on a continuous, rotational basis. This would be useful to the Americans and all allies involved and would also give the Australian AWACs priceless operational experience.

The SAS will do anything asked of them. There will certainly be an allied special forces capability to rescue any pilots or air crew who go down for any reason in insecure locations. The Australian SAS has a long history of operating in the Middle East. In the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the SAS were among the first allied forces in and they captured the giant Al-Asad air base, which housed at the time 57 Soviet MIG aircraft.

Jeffrey Grey, in his authoritative *A Military History of Australia*, argues that Australia has had a greater military impact in the Middle East than in any other part of the world, from taking Beersheba from the Ottoman Empire in World War I to the Rats of Tobruk in World War II.

If there is action in Iraq, this will be at the invitation of the Iraqi government. As such it will not need any UN resolution. However, Syria would be more complicated. Senior US officials and military figures have said they do not believe it will be possible to defeat the Islamic State entirely on the Iraqi side of the border.

Taking military action in Syria would be more complicated politically and legally. The US would not want to be seen acting to defend the regime of Bashar al-Assad, not least because it would not want to alienate the majority Sunni population of Syria. Therefore it would not want to act even on an invitation from Damascus. Washington might decide that the suite of resolutions on the Islamic State already passed by the UN Security Council offers sufficient legal justification. Alternatively, it might want one more UNSC resolution. This could be complicated, not only by Russia but by China. Another option would be for the US to operate on the basis of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine.

One crucial political factor will be mobilising a group of at least four to six Middle East allies to join in the US-led effort. The actions of the Islamic State have been so extreme as to outrage all shades of decent human opinion around the world, and this would make it easier to get consensus for action. However, Obama, and Abbott too, may be making a mistake by pitching the justification for action purely in humanitarian terms. This is by far the easiest sell, but there is an equally urgent strategic dynamic at work.

Abbott is giving serious consideration to attending the UN Security Council meeting late next month at which Obama will make a major presentation to the world on his response to the Islamic State.

The range of Abbott government measures to the difficulties arising from the Islamic State's emergence is broad and the most important are the domestic measures — such as much better control of the movement of people on the national security watch list through airports. But the government is also invested in the US-led allied response to this crisis. It wants Obama to act and to succeed, and he will do whatever it reasonably can to produce that outcome.