



Straight Talk

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Straight Talk: Christian Leuprecht

In the latest instalment of its *Straight Talk* series of Q and As, MLI spoke with Christian Leuprecht, a professor of political science at Royal Military College and Queen's University, and a Senior Fellow with the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, on Canada's involvement in fighting the extremist group known as Islamic State.



Christian Leuprecht is Professor of Political Science at the Royal Military College of Canada and Senior Fellow at the Macdonald Laurier Institute. He holds a ministerial appointment to the Governing Council of the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, is president of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee 01: Armed Forces and Conflict Resolution, and a United Nations Security Structure Expert. He is cross-appointed to the Department of Political Studies and the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University where he is also a fellow of the Institute of Intergovernmental Relations and the Queen's Centre for International and Defence Policy. As a foremost expert on security and defence, political demography, and comparative federalism and multilevel governance, he is regularly called as an expert witness to testify before committees of Parliament

His award-winning publications have appeared in English, German, French, and Spanish. His over 100 publications include 9 books and nearly 40 articles. His editorials appear regularly across Canada's national newspapers and he is a frequent commentator in domestic and international media.

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MLI: Let's start with a fundamental question: Who is Islamic State, or ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant), or ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and el-Sham), and what led to its rise to prominence in Iraq and Syria?

Leuprecht: The group's origins go back to the initial Sunni uprising in 2003. So, as a group, it's been around for some time. It really came to prominence with the current leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi who is a cunning organizer and a shrewd leader. He has a fairly broad base of support around which he's built the organization, and its rise, I think, only came as a surprise to those who haven't been watching the region carefully.

But, in large part it's due to the Americans essentially abandoning Iraq in 2009, unilaterally withdrawing their forces. It is simply not the sort of state that people had hoped it would be, and it has been the victim of blatant sectarian politics by the Iraqi leadership in general and by former prime minister Nouri al Maliki in particular.

It just couldn't have a good ending so as long as Sunnis felt alienated from the political dialogue and political sphere in Iraq. We can contain ISIS, but we can't contain other organizations springing up who will express Sunni grievances, so ultimately there is no "military solution" to this problem. This is ultimately a political problem that requires a political compromise. We know that political compromises in the Middle East seem to be extremely hard to forge because it's a winner-take-all kind of politics. Whoever runs the country, that's the group that controls the politics, the economy and the people with the guns. So, the future here really hinges on the extent to which the protagonists can forge a political consensus.

MLI: Was it the George W. Bush-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 that created the current situation?

Leuprecht: This is a counterfactual question. Yes, Iraq was internally a very strong hegemonic state prior to the invasion, but so was Syria, and we saw what ultimately happened in Syria. Saddam Hussein and all of his cronies were either Sunnis or part of other religious minorities that ruled essentially over the 70 percent Shia population, and so what we see now is Shias having turned the tables.

Was the invasion and the optimism about a democratic Iraq that came with it somewhat naïve? Yes. Would it have meant that we wouldn't have turmoil today if we hadn't had that invasion? That's hard to say. When we look at what happened in Egypt and with the Arab Spring, it's not clear that we wouldn't have seen a similar uprising within Iraq.

MLI: Let's return to the question of what you even call this group, which has been reported in a number of ways. What are the origins of Islamic State, or ISIL, or ISIS, and what do you think it should be properly called?

Leuprecht: The group's different names have always tried to communicate that it does not respect borders; it doesn't recognize countries and regimes. Its ambition is to re-establish a new seventh-century Caliphate, which was what some consider the height of a pure sort of Islam. By calling itself the Islamic State, even though it doesn't recognize borders or the state governments that it is fighting, it is trying to bestow an inherent international legitimacy upon itself. This is why you see US Secretary of State John Kerry, for instance, referring to the group as *Daesh*, which is a derogatory name used in the Middle East for the so-called Islamic State, trying to deny it the claims to legitimacy it tries to conjure up with its name and its tactics.

MLI: How would you characterize the current state of the conflict. What have IS or *Daesh* forces achieved? And, what success have Western states and their Mideast allies had in containing them?

Leuprecht: Well, I think the first lesson here is Western leaders might want to do a better job at listening to intelligence services. We spend a lot of money on intelligence services, but it seems whenever they come with warnings, leaders promptly ignore them. What is referred to today as Islamic State could have been contained in 2011, when there were the first indications that this was a group that was rapidly gaining in influence and organization, and funding and recruits. But at the time nobody was interested, and so now we're having to do firefighting.

I do think the Western effort has contained the reach of the group. We haven't seen major territorial expansions since the mission began, and in fact the group has lost some territory. The battle for Ramadi is often interpreted as sort of this big win for IS. But it took them 14 months to take Ramadi, they had already controlled half of the city, and in the end, I think, they just wore down Iraqi Security Forces or scared them off with brutal tactics.

IS has changed its tactics and is trying to fight on multiple fronts at the same time, so they are deliberately spreading the Iraqi Security Forces as thin as they can, and then trying to surge in places like Ramadi, which is in the most restive province. But, just recently we had a major attempted offensive by IS being thwarted by Iraqi Security Forces. I don't see Ramadi as a big victory for IS, and Iraqi forces are now mounting operations to attempt to retake the city.

I think in Iraq we have IS reasonably contained. Beating them back is proving a much greater challenge. It will probably be months if not more before we're in any sort of shape with the Coalition partners to try to re-take places such as Mosul where they are very entrenched.

The greater challenge is what IS might be able to accomplish in Syria. It's estimated that President Bashar Assad has lost about half of his officer corps, and he's probably lost about half of his regular troops. So it's not clear how long Assad is going to be able to keep up the fight. He's simply running out of boots on the ground.

So, the greater concern is to what extent can Assad continue to withstand the onslaught of IS? If IS were eventually to take Damascus, we could see a massive genocide, and the creation of a second Afghanistan (under the Taliban) with IS controlling what is arguably strategically one of the key states in the Middle East. Syria is at the crossroads.

I think the West is hoping to stem IS's financial flows and its recruits — we know its foreign recruits are down by some 90 percent, although not necessarily recruits from the region. Perhaps we can starve IS of the resources it needs to continue to run these types of offensives. It appears that there has been some success in that regard.

Of course, it's a genuine dilemma in the sense that there are only bad options in Syria. What's the alternative? Well, the alternative is someone like Assad staying in power and the Western powers, especially Canada and the US, have said that is also not an option for them. Turkey has made it clear that they want nothing else but to see Assad gone, so the challenge here is that even if IS can be contained, it's not clear what the end game would be for Syria.

MLI: That perhaps brings us to Canada's participation in the operation against IS, which has been the subject of much debate here. Some would prefer Canada to only be involved in United Nations sanctioned missions. How would you characterize the debate and what do you think is Canada's best role in the region?

Leuprecht: As I think back to the Balkans, Canada has been involved in missions that have not had an explicit UN mandate. I think there was a strong sense that the instability in the Middle East is having a ripple effect throughout the West and something needed to be done to contain this group and its narrative. It posed a real threat of inspiring attacks such as the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris earlier this year. What I got from Prime Minister Stephen Harper was a sense of moral obligation to stand up to a group that sets about trying to wipe out religious minorities, that systematically uses rape as a tool of war, a group that throws homosexuals off rooftops, that immolates people and drowns them in cages. These actions are simply so uncivilized and inhumane that Canada has, I think in the Prime Minister's view, a moral obligation to do something. This was also an opportunity for Canada to punch above its weight, and Canada has never played a big role in the Middle East.

Being involved in the air campaign and deploying Special Forces now gives Canada more clout and gives us some say over the outcomes in the Middle East and Middle East strategy, in particular where the Americans are concerned. If you don't make a combat contribution in Washington's eyes, it's nice that you come out but you don't really count. So if you want to be taken seriously you need to show up in a real capacity. That allows Canada also to hold the US and the coalition's feet to the fire. It makes it much harder, for instance, for the Americans to bail unilaterally on Syria now that Canada is involved and partnering with the US.

Even if we don't have a whole lot of planes to contribute, Canada is always a valued player because we integrate so seamlessly with the Americans. The Americans love working with Canada. We bring the same sort of mindset, same technology, same communications and intelligence—all of these things that our Middle Eastern partners don't have. Many of the Middle Eastern states don't have the same type of precision weaponry that Canada brings to bear. So, for a relatively modest commitment, Canada gets substantial recognition for what it does.

MLI: There was a fair bit of discussion about what the rules of engagement are for Canadian troops who were sent as trainers. Do you share those concerns that Canadians might come under fire, or do you think Canadian troops might even take a more active combat role?

Leuprecht: I would chalk that debate up to some ignorance about the role that Special Forces play and how Special Forces operate. Iraqi Security Forces and the Kurdish forces are not used to this type of warfare. They don't have the command-and-control structure, the intelligence structure, the operations and planning capabilities, or the logistics capabilities to support this type of warfare. So, simply us sending a few advisers who sit in an office somewhere in Erbil or show people how to use their semi-automatic machine guns wasn't going to do a whole lot to stop the IS advance.

What they needed were people who were going to be able to help out on the forward operating lines, able to help with command-and-control, strategic planning, collating the necessary intelligence. And keep in mind that this is not the First World War. The lines are very fluid in this type of conflict and you might say there's a front area, but there's not necessarily a clear line on which you necessarily stay on this side or that side. It was only a matter of time before Canadians were going to come under fire. The Canadians travel with force protection, so that means with the capability to take out adversaries should they come under fire. And, as we saw in what appears to be sort of a friendly fire incident, this is war and people are going to make mistakes. I would say what we saw with the tragic death of Sgt.

Andrew Doiron was perhaps that this happened because our partners don't necessarily have certain capabilities. Canada is going to be reviewing all of its measures as a result, to make sure this doesn't repeat itself and luckily it has not, which suggests that we have learned from this experience.

Some of these allied troops have been on the front lines for a long time. They know that when anybody comes up to them it might be a matter of life and death, and so in this instance we had somebody who was perhaps a little young and inexperienced and who has been involved in firefights – and we know they had been involved in a firefight within the last day. Sometimes people just get a little nervous and as a result pull the trigger when they shouldn't have. Many of them are civilians who signed up to protect what they see as their Kurdish homeland. These are not professional soldiers; they haven't spent years in training, and so inherently mistakes unfortunately do happen.

MLI: What does the government owe Parliament and Canadians in terms of clarity about what this mission entails, what its aims are and what the commitment is even down to issues such as rules of engagement for Canadian trainers? And, has this government lived up to that standard?

Leuprecht: Constitutionally, the government doesn't owe Parliament anything. The deployment of Armed Forces is a prerogative of the Crown, and therefore of the executive and ultimately the Prime Minister. What we have seen is a shift towards parliamentary discussion, especially since Afghanistan, with regard to deployment of the Armed Forces in what the government characterizes as combat missions. The government says that this current mission is not a combat mission and so a parliamentary debate was not required.

Are Canadians better off as a result of increased parliamentary debate about military engagements? Absolutely. We want to make sure Canadians are well informed about public policy in general and about the deployment of the Armed Forces, in particular. I do think if we compare the current situation to the 1990s, for instance, without passing judgment on any colour of government in the 1990s, we are a lot more transparent about both the nature of military deployments and what actually happens on the ground. If you think about the Medak Pocket incident in the Balkans, for instance, the government went out of its way to silence everybody who was involved to make sure it didn't come out in public that we were somewhat involved in an active fire engagement, let alone one with folks who were supposedly our allies there. Inherently there's probably opportunity for greater public debate and greater public involvement, but I would say that even in 20 years we've come a considerable way.

MLI: Was the debate of the Afghanistan mission an important precedent? Is it the kind of thing we'll see in future missions?

Leuprecht: Yes and no. I think if we did have the type of deployment that we had in Afghanistan, the Afghanistan precedent would suggest that, yes, we would see this type of debate again and a vote in Parliament, even if it's just for the purpose of buying political insurance for the governing party. In practice, I have long argued that we will not see a deployment of that sort of scale anytime soon anywhere in the world because I think people realize that we spent a whole lot of treasure, we spent a whole lot of blood, and there are real questions about what we got in return. Even in terms of international political cachet, it's not clear that Canada is any more or less respected in the world today because of what it did in Afghanistan.

I think we also learned from that mission that these large-scale commitments can become highly problematic because then we get all the constructivist ideologues involved who rather than just trying to build security, hope they can turn a country like Afghanistan into a flourishing liberal democracy within a matter of months or years. I think those hopes were resoundingly dashed, and that gave rise

to what is known in the military as “mission creep”, which meant that rather than being able to focus on the security situation, the military got dragged into all sorts of state-building type activities that I think ultimately detracted from what the military does best. These are probably activities that had best been left to other agencies, but the military was doing them in some cases in Afghanistan because other agencies and NGOs weren’t interested. So, I think we learned very hard lessons from Afghanistan and I think that scale of mission is not something we’re likely to see repeated any time soon.

What we are more likely to see is precisely the sort of missions that we’ve seen with respect to Libya or Iraq or Ukraine or the Baltic States: Canada making sort of limited-term commitments in limited engagements to achieve very narrowly defined objectives. I think this is more the type of future of missions we might see, but at the same time I should also say that if you look over the past 20 years, we’ve been horrendously poor — as have other countries — at predicting what the next war is going to look like and where it’s going to be. So I would temper my comments by saying that anything is possible, but it seems most likely that we’re going to see limited engagements and in co-operation with our allies. Having Canadian allies involved is proving very important to the current US approach.

MLI: How should Canada engage with this mission going forward? Should we be doing more?

Leuprecht: You know, people always criticize Canada for not spending enough on defence, but I would say rather than looking at just the amount that we spend, look at what we actually get from that. Canadians get a very capable military that can engage in full spectrum warfare and is able to do whatever the government of the day calls upon it to do. We are contributing what I call the “six-pack strategy”. One of the approaches we take is when airplanes are needed, whether it’s in Libya or Iraq or the Balkans we’ll send a six-pack of planes. That’s an important and considerable and substantial contribution by Canada to make to the cause. I think we’ll see a lot more engagement of special operators and Special Forces, and I think we’ll also see continued engagement by the Navy. So, let’s just say all the elements that can be readily deployed. This is known as force projection and provides sort of an extended deterrence. These are places where we can provide genuine value and a clear economy scale with a limited contribution. So, I think what Canada is doing is sort of what can be reasonably expected under the current circumstances, and that’s more than what many of our allies of similar capabilities have been doing so far when it comes to Syria and Iraq. I think Canada is looking pretty good overall.

MLI: As Canada looks at what we’ll call its state of defence readiness, how should the military best prepare itself for the future?

Leuprecht: Again, over the last 20 years we haven’t been particularly good at predicting what the next fight is going to look like or where it’s going to take place. So, what that means is that Canada has in the past and will continue to be well served by maintaining a full-spectrum capability. Some of our allies that have the full spectrum of capabilities are getting out of that game because of fiscal constraints. The Dutch are one such example. So, Canada’s ability to contribute in pretty much whatever way it might be called upon, is going to become a more important asset than it has been in the past. The world is becoming less stable rather than a more stable place. There is going to be more heavy lifting to do in terms of security and I think Canada will become an even more valued partner in collective security than it has been and that will increase our influence. Also, politically, it’s often easier for other countries to agree to work with Canada or to engage in missions in which Canada is involved than if a mission is simply led by the Americans. So, I think Canada can also leverage its political clout and has traditionally done this.

There will always be those who say, let's just go back to peacekeeping. To that I would say, this is not the world of 1960s, 1970s or even the 1980s. This is the world of the 21st century where the challenges that we deal with include insurgencies, non-state actors, weapons proliferation, and all of that, in areas of the world with very weak and limited state capacity. So, what is needed today is quite different than traditional UN peacekeeping.

MLI: How do you think the federal election will affect our mission, given the debate to this point?

Leuprecht: Well, I think the government deliberately extended the mission by 12 months—so, well through the federal election—precisely to ensure that the mission would not be politicized more than it likely is going to be anyway as part of the election campaign. I think there's nothing worse, especially for our allies, than uncertainty. The last thing they'd want to see is Canada haphazardly withdrawing from this type of coalition. Everybody is counting on the contributions that people are making and so I think the mission's extension through next spring is long enough that whatever government comes into power has the opportunity to reassess its commitment. It will be able to reassess the situation on the ground, whether the Canadian commitment is the right commitment, and whether Canada should stay the course, pare back the commitment, or expand the commitment. As I always point out, this is the Middle East, so all conversations we have are *ceteris paribus*, all other things being equal. In the Middle East, we can wake up tomorrow and the situation can be completely different on the ground. The entire security situation could change tomorrow and it might require a rethinking by the government of the type, nature and extent of its commitment to the mission and region.

I would guess that this is not going to be the last mission of this type in this region. We're going to be engaged in the Middle East over the coming years and decades. So, it's important that we figure out what our commitments can be and should be, what our medium and long-term strategic approaches need to be, and how we make sure that we keep Canadian citizens adequately informed about why it's important for Canada to be present and active and engaged in the way that it is. So, rather than seeing the current mission as a one-off, unfortunately it is likely we will see more demand for the Canadian Armed Forces in similar types of situations and commitments. What will be required is a comprehensive approach by the Government of Canada to these very difficult areas of the world.

MLI was able to draw the following three recommendations from its conversation with Prof. Leuprecht.

1. Canada should maintain a full-spectrum capability. Being able to contribute to international missions will be increasingly valuable in the coming years.
2. Be prepared for more limited missions like the Iraq engagement, rather than traditional UN peacekeeping-style missions or major deployments like the Afghan mission.
3. Listen to intelligence agencies. Western leaders were warned of the rise of IS in 2011 but took no action.

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