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Chair

The Honourable Peter Kent

Standing Committee on National Defence

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• (1600)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC)): Good afternoon, colleagues. Welcome to the Standing Committee on National Defence. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) we are here for the study of Canada's response to ISIL.

We have three witnesses before us today. They are Rear-Admiral Gilles Couturier, director general, international security policy; Colonel Mark Gendron, deputy judge advocate general, operations; and Major-General Michael Hood, director of staff, strategic joint staff.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): I have a point of order, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: On a point of order, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris: Mr. Chairman, last Thursday you announced that this meeting was going to be held here in this room for the reason that the public would be able to see it because it's being televised, and we're grateful for that. We're also very grateful to have our witnesses here today.

My concern is that at the same time this is taking place, General Jonathan Vance, the chief of the joint operations command, is making a technical briefing for the media; therefore, the media can't be here. The same thing happened on October 17, when Parliament was not in session and no members of Parliament were here.

This is the committee that is given responsibility for accountability of the government to Parliament. We are the parliamentarians, yet we somehow seem to be dragging the media away from the parliamentary process. In fact, there is a general in charge of joint operations doing these briefings for the media, which can't, therefore, be here with this Parliament.

I find that objectionable, Mr. Chair, and I want to put that on the record.

The Chair: Thank you. I recognize that point.

Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As parliamentarians we have no control over when department officials can appear. General Vance, for whatever reason, could only do his briefing today at three o'clock. I don't think we should be critical of that.

I hope that as parliamentarians, we aren't trying to manage our schedules for the benefit of the media. We're here. We're joined by upper leadership within the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces. I think we should be grateful for that, and I'm looking forward to their presentations.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bezan and Mr. Harris. I take both points under advisement. I'm sure there will be opportunities for further discussion for procedures and practices in the future.

For now, General Hood, your opening remarks, please.

MGen Michael Hood (Director of Staff, Strategic Joint Staff, Department of National Defence): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to appear in front of you today. I'm pleased to be here today to provide you with a summary of Operation Impact, the Canadian Armed Forces contribution to the U.S.-led multinational coalition in Iraq, assisting the Government of Iraq in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL.

I'm Major-General Michael Hood, the director of staff. I'm pleased to have with me Rear-Admiral Gilles Couturier, who is director general of international security policy; and Colonel Mark Gendron, deputy judge advocate general for operations.

[Translation]

Today, I would like to walk you through the Canadian Armed Forces current contributions to the mission. We would then be pleased to answer your questions.

[English]

Earlier this year, ISIL began seizing territory throughout the Republic of Iraq, and since that time Iraqi security forces have been engaged in an ongoing struggle with this well-armed and well-organized terrorist entity. Its strategy in Iraq is to create a state based on its radical ideology, and its advances have threatened and displaced many thousands of Iraqis and have caused a humanitarian crisis threatening the stability of the entire region. Its reach, however, is not simply limited to the Middle East, as even outside of Iraq's borders ISIL threatens the security of western countries, with calls for sympathizers to conduct targeted attacks.

In late September, the Government of Iraq requested, through the United Nations Security Council, that the U.S. help lead an international coalition to help Iraq defend itself against ISIL. The U.S. has responded to Iraq's request and has facilitated the creation of an international coalition committed to containing further ISIL expansion and countering the threat posed by ISIL to regional and international security.

The Canadian Armed Forces' contribution to Iraq's fight against ISIL began in August, when the Government of Canada directed the armed forces to provide strategic airlift of military aid in support of international efforts to assist the Republic of Iraq. The Canadian Air Task Force Iraq, consisting of one Royal Canadian Air Force CC-130J Hercules, and one C-17 Globemaster III, and approximately 100 air crew technicians and logistics specialists were quickly deployed to the Middle East for this task.

Over the following six weeks, the Royal Canadian Air Force flew 25 flights and delivered over 1.6 million pounds of badly needed military supplies donated by Albania and the Czech Republic to Iraqi security forces. As well, since early October a team of highly trained special operations forces has been deployed to Iraq to advise and assist Iraqi security forces with their struggle against ISIL.

The team of Canadian special operations forces personnel will mentor and facilitate training of Iraqi forces, focusing on the planning, preparation, and conduct of operations against ISIL. This valuable assistance will help Iraqi forces improve their tactical and technical proficiency so that they are better able to train for and conduct operations against ISIL.

• (1605)

[Translation]

On October 5, the Government of Canada announced that the Canadian Armed Forces will contribute to the international coalition conducting air strikes in Iraq, with the aim of degrading ISIL's ability to carry out military operations against the people of the Republic of Iraq.

[English]

Using our tactical and strategic airlift capabilities, the Airbus, Hercules, and Globemaster, the CAF has deployed a joint task force to augment ongoing coalition operations in Iraq. It includes six CF-188 Hornet fighter aircraft, one CC-150T Polaris aerial refueller, two CP-140 Aurora surveillance aircraft, and nearly 600 personnel, including air crew and support personnel. We also have planning teams working alongside coalition counterparts, and a wide network of liaison officers deployed with our mission partners.

The joint task force commenced operations on October 30 and is currently employed in three distinct lines of operations. The Polaris is conducting air-to-air refuelling operations in support of Canadian and coalition aircraft operating against ISIL. The two Aurora aircraft are conducting valuable intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, ISR, missions over Iraq to gather information on ISIL. The Hornets are conducting strike missions against identified ISIL targets. The Hornets, operating under national rules of engagement, use precision-guided munitions against targets that have been validated by a rigorous targeting process and authorized by our own national chain of command.

[Translation]

Operation IMPACT is a significant and valuable contribution to the international coalition assisting the Republic of Iraq in its fight against ISIL. The mission clearly demonstrates the Canadian resolve to combat ISIL's radical ideology and supports coalition efforts to rapidly contain ISIL, and degrade their combat capability, so that Iraqi forces can advance and expel ISIL from the Republic of Iraq. Furthermore, it demonstrates our resolve to stand with our allies and make positive contributions to international peace and security.

[English]

Much has been achieved in the fight to stem the advance of ISIL since the beginning of coalition operations. Iraqi security forces in northern Iraq, who received military supplies airlifted by our RCAF aircraft, have stemmed the ISIL advance. However, more remains to be done. The Canadian Armed Forces are committed to this continued effort to support Iraqi security forces and the democratically elected Government of Iraq.

Thank you for your time. I and my colleagues would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, General Hood.

Mr. Larose, you have a point of order?

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-François Larose (Repentigny, FD): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I would like to know whether I will have an opportunity to question the witnesses today and at all the meetings I will be participating in. I wanted to raise a quick point of order, so that my rights and privileges as a member of this committee, pursuant to Standing Order 104, will be recognized.

I want to remind you that the motion adopted by the committee on November 5, 2013, states the following with regards to the second round of questioning: "[...] based on the principle that each committee member should have a full opportunity to question the witness(es)."

So I would like to repeat my question, Mr. Chair. Will I have the right to question the witnesses today and at subsequent committee meetings?

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Larose.

Colleagues know that as chair of this committee I have to ensure that the rules of the committee, both as prescribed by the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* as well as the routine motion, which was passed at the time this committee was constituted, are carried out. My role is to ensure that those rules and procedures are carried out fairly. In recent days, that has been somewhat more challenging. Mr. Larose is quite correct in recognizing that the principle stated in the routine motion is that each committee member should have a full opportunity to question the witnesses. There is a need, and we respected that at our last meeting.

Colleagues, I would ask you, because of the time lost due to parliamentary business today, that we limit further discussion on this. I've decided that based on the routine motion and my interpretation of the intent of the motion, I will give the member for Repentigny, Mr. Larose, a slot at the end of the second round of questioning at today's meeting.

That said, and to ensure continuing decorum of this committee, I would suggest that the committee take time on Thursday, November 6, two days hence, to discuss the order of questioning and to deliver clear instructions to the chair going forward.

So, colleagues, again with your approval, we will now begin the first round of questioning with seven-minute slots, with Mr. Norlock, please.

•(1610)

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Through you to the witnesses, thank you for attending today.

My first question will be a question that I think is on all Canadians' minds right now. In the last 48 hours we have seen our Canadian Armed Forces, and particularly the RCAF, directly engaged in the theatre. I know there are some things you can say, and some things you can't say, but for the benefit of those Canadians who are watching and this committee, could you give us a rundown or run-through of what occurred in the last 48 hours, vis-à-vis the air strikes that occurred most recently?

MGen Michael Hood: I can. Thank you, Mr. Norlock.

I did take the opportunity before coming here to actually close with Lieutenant-General Vance so I have a reasonably fresh summary from the operational command.

The Air Task Force, and the aircraft involved, arrived at destination, in Kuwait, on the October 28 and commenced flying operations on October 30. Since that time, and including in the last 24 hours, our CF aircraft have flown 27 sorties, which include 18 by fighter aircraft, 4 by our Polaris tanker, and 5 by the CP-140 ISR aircraft.

On October 31, one CP-140 Aurora conducted intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations that directly supported coalition efforts. The Aurora enabled multiple coalition fighter aircraft to strike ISIL targets in the vicinity of al-Qaim. The strike resulted in the destruction of a key ISIL base that was used to stage operations from the border area into the Euphrates line of communications. The Aurora was the platform lead for the mission and provided important battle damage assessments to evaluate the success of strikes.

On November 2, Sunday, CF-18 Hornets conducted their first combat air strike on ISIL targets. The four targets were located near a dam west of Fallujah, and consisted of heavy engineering vehicles. They were being used to divert water from the Euphrates River to create flooding and displace the population in Anbar Province, while also denying water to other populations downstream. By flooding certain areas, ISIL forced civilians and Iraqi security forces onto specific routes, which they then placed improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, on. Additionally, the heavy engineering vehicles

were being used to develop enhanced defensive positions, which would have made future clearing operations for the Iraqi security forces more difficult.

Our forces worked with the combined air operations centre and coalition targeting assets during the approximately four-hour flight. Five-hundred pound laser-guided bombs destroyed and damaged the heavy engineering vehicles identified, and removed them from further employment.

The degradation of ISIL's ability to use the dam as a weapon contributes to ensuring that they will not be able to use the Euphrates River against the population of Anbar Province. The attacks also assured the removal of heavy equipment necessary to develop defensive positions that would eventually have been taken by security forces.

That's a summary of some of the activity over the last four days. Certainly the intent would be to continue to provide regular updates through tech briefings, likely on a weekly briefing where we'd be able to summarize what has transpired.

•(1615)

Mr. Rick Norlock: Thank you very much, General Hood.

My second question is I think more than just a personal observation, it's something that other members of Parliament have discussed with me, and for sure some of my constituents, and I wonder if you wouldn't mind commenting.

Some many hours prior to the official release by the Canadian Forces as to our actions that you have just described to us, we heard it from U.S. news sources. I'm wondering if there isn't a better coordinated way that you either can respond to today or can bring back to senior command staff so that we cooperate in a theatre of war but cooperate also on the news releases, so that Canadians, who are very much heavily invested in this operation, at least get to know what's going on at the same time as our American counterparts and we don't have to watch American television to find out what's going on. I wonder if you would like to comment on that.

MGen Michael Hood: I'll certainly offer just a brief perspective, sir.

What I saw in the first announcements of the strikes that had taken place on Sunday was through a press release by the Minister of National Defence. We coordinate very closely with allies and the U. S. command in the central command in Tampa, and move forward. I think as you well can imagine, in coordinating the size of activity, with the number of partners that are in there, it's definitely going to take some close coordination. We appreciate that some of this information was subsequently released by CENTCOM before we were able to organize a tech brief. At the time General Vance was down in Tampa liaising with General Austin, the commander of CENTCOM, and, in fact, the timing of his tech brief today was related to his return travel for that. But we will put every endeavour to get better at that, sir.

Mr. Rick Norlock: Thank you very much. It's just really helpful from our perspective, and we'll try to do the same from the civilian side of things.

I have one other question. One of the things we're asked—once again, on this tremendous investment, absolutely, especially the human investment that we have in this operation—is whether we are making gains. You can corroborate this or not, but I'm led to believe that our operations, our allied operations that are occurring currently and that we are actively engaged in now, have resulted in the ability to support the Kurds, the Shias, and the other folks on our side, shall we say, in making gains that they may not have been able to make otherwise. You alluded to our strike.

I wonder if you could give us some observations as to the success of the endeavour so far in our aim to assist the Iraqi government forces.

MGen Michael Hood: I can certainly try. While Canada has just started air operations, other coalition allies have been active for quite some period. You'll recall how quick the ISIL advance was into Iraq. In fact, the map I put up really shows their areas of advance towards their main objective, which is the capture of Baghdad.

In that quick advance, they were gaining momentum, travelling in some very large and sometimes armoured formations that in many events as they approached Iraqi-controlled areas were able to quickly advance through there, in part just by the mass and sheer size of the force that was coming forward. Allied air activity has blunted that advance.

In fact, as you may have heard—it was certainly reported publicly—they no longer travel in large formations because those are simply too easy a target for air power to take forward. We've now seen ISIL move to a more asymmetric style of attack, which, by and large, while still a challenge for Iraqi security forces, does not pose the same level of threat as their massed advances previously.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, General Hood.

Your time is up, Mr. Norlock.

Mr. Harris, please.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, gentlemen, for your presence here today and for your presentation. Along with Mr. Norlock and many Canadians, I did wonder why we heard from the United States before we heard from our own government. We were getting rather opaque statements from the Minister of National Defence.

I'm surprised that you first heard of it through a press release, as opposed to through the chain of command. You are not in the chain of command in relation to this operation, I take it.

MGen Michael Hood: No, I should have correctly stated that Canadians would have first heard about it then. I had heard of it prior to that press release.

Mr. Jack Harris: I guess that's my first question. What is the chain of command? Is it just run out of Tampa, Florida, as you've pointed out? It's not a NATO operation, which we've had before. In Libya, for example, there was a joint command led by General Bouchard. This is led by the general you spoke of in Tampa. Is that correct?

MGen Michael Hood: Perhaps I can just provide some context. All Canadian Forces personnel deployed are under the full command of the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Lawson.

Mr. Jack Harris: But where does General Vance fit in? He was down in Tampa.

MGen Michael Hood: General Vance is the commander of joint operations command here in Ottawa. He is in charge of deployed operations in the Canadian chain of command.

We're working in a coalition, a rather large coalition with close allies, which is a U.S.-led and coordinated coalition campaign run by central command. They have headquarters in the region, but their main headquarters, with a lot of allied liaison officers, are down in Tampa, as they have been since previous iterations of activity in the region.

Mr. Jack Harris: I guess that gets us through the first target being what at least the Americans call “the bulldozer and a dump truck”, talking about heavy construction equipment. Was that chosen by Canada? Or, as we've heard in reports, was this proposed by the United States? Could you go through it? Maybe Colonel Gendron could help us with that.

I know from the Libyan operation that ultimately Canada can decide what targets to take, but I'm mindful of the fact that bulldozers and dump trucks are normally not driven by soldiers in civilian situations, so how does that decision-making take place from Canada's point of view? In an added point, General Vance did, on October 17, say there were revised rules of engagement at work here. Could you explain that?

MGen Michael Hood: Absolutely, Mr. Harris.

First of all with respect to a coalition campaign, there is a shared joint view of the targets, in this case in Iraq. Those are prioritized against the objectives that may be in play at the time, in coordination with Iraqis.

The tasking of missions, so for Canadian aircraft or any of our allied aircraft, is coordinated through CENTCOM, and targets are assigned against those missions.

Those then come into a Canadian chain of command. We have a theatre engagement authority in the air operation centre that is ultimately in charge of viewing that every target Canada would consider striking is, as a Canadian view, in line with our rules of engagement, which I'll get to.

If there is a risk of collateral damage or another risk in the conduct of that target, it is then pushed out of theatre to General Vance. He can approve a certain level of targets. If he can't approve something, it ultimately goes up to the Chief of the Defence Staff. That targeting chain is completely approved by Canada, and ultimately by the pilot when he releases the weapons.

We don't generally talk about rules of engagement writ large. Suffice it to say the chief approves specific rules of engagement that enable the disciplined use of force by Canadian Forces in this particular conduct.

There is a set of rules of engagement, which I'm not going to discuss right now, but I can tell you from an allied perspective that this is the most accurate conflict we've ever been party to. It's accurate because of the weapons we're using; it's accurate because of the limits we've put on collateral damage, and because we are taking such care, you haven't seen aircraft drop on every strike mission.

With respect to the targets and this specific one, it's clear that as a campaign objective, the flooding of the Euphrates or the denying of water to downstream is of great concern to the Iraqi government. Hence that target would come up and be prioritized within that period of time.

My army colleagues would tell you that engineering equipment is some of the most valuable and it is greatly protected on a battlefield. Hence in this case, it was viewed as a highly prioritized target by CENTCOM and then by the Canadian chain, and it was ultimately approved for a Canadian strike.

• (1625)

Mr. Jack Harris: From your explanation I understand the strategic value of the target, but one of the early critiques of the notion of air strikes in Iraq, particularly given the large number of countries that had signed up to do those, was that very soon you might “run out” of targets. Even General Lawson referred to that recently as well.

I take it that is not why the target we were talking about this weekend was chosen. Is that, though, a concern for you? You mentioned the fact that they have changed their tactics, that they are not going to be out in the open with tanks and Humvees or whatever open to attack.

Are we in danger of being ineffective in a very short period of time?

MGen Michael Hood: I don't think so at all, Mr. Harris. In fact the effect that air power has brought to this particular conflict is clearly evident.

I think it's accepted and would be expected by members here today that air power alone is not going to push back ISIL, but it is going to deny them freedom to manoeuvre. So whether we're actually striking deliberate targets or targets that may arise over the course of events, the deterrent effect of air power being there and the success the coalition is enjoying in those strikes is having real effects.

We've seen it. Perhaps you have seen some reporting on the news about the stabilization north of Mosul with peshmerga forces all supported by allied air power. Targets remain and will continue to remain, but we just have to adapt to the dispersed tactics that ISIL has evolved its campaign to.

The Chair: Thank you, General.

Mr. Chisu, go ahead, please, for seven minutes.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to the witnesses for their presentation.

General, I have a question for you. You were mentioning, of course, the engineering vehicles. They were armoured engineering vehicles and obviously operated by military personnel, right? Then you chose the targets.

MGen Michael Hood: The targets were engineering vehicles. I wouldn't be able to describe the level of armour; I haven't had a briefing that would allow me to say. But they were being used

regularly by ISIL in the construction of a dam and defensive positions.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: As I have heard from literature and from research, ISIL has extremely powerful military capabilities and has used them to overtake huge swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, as we see on the map. If ISIL is not degraded and ultimately destroyed by the coalition, what do you foresee ISIL being capable of? How much more damage could it inflict on Iraq and Syria if not confronted by the coalition air strikes that are going on?

MGen Michael Hood: I wouldn't want to hypothesize on what could have happened. But I think that if you look at the advance, just in the context of Iraq, that ISIL had enjoyed very quickly, this is of great concern; hence why so many regional partners have joined some of our more traditional partners and other NATO countries in this coalition. There's a shared view that ISIL presents a threat not only to Iraq and Syria but also to regional stability and certainly to many western countries as well as their reaches.

I think that the very rapid stand-up of a coalition speaks volumes to the risk that many countries feel that ISIL represented at the time and continues to represent today.

• (1630)

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: In your opinion, what is the level of training ISIL got? They're moving very quickly and in quite large numbers. Where does their training originate? How are we assessing this threat?

MGen Michael Hood: What I've certainly seen and been briefed on is that....

You have to remember that operations in Syria against the Assad regime by both the Free Syrian Army and a conglomerate of ideologically motivated entities have been going on for almost two years. Those troops, those ISIL forces in Iraq, are battle-hardened. Add to that a number of senior former Iraqi military personnel, Baathist parties for example, disenfranchised from that. The assessment is that they're well led, well experienced, and very motivated. So they do represent a considerable threat to Iraq.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: When looking at their military capabilities, it does not appear that they currently have the capabilities to pose a threat to our aircraft. Is there a danger that they will have this kind of equipment?

MGen Michael Hood: We take every step in operations to limit that threat, both through the use of integral defensive equipment on our aircraft and on the tactics, techniques, and procedures we do.

I'm not going to talk specifically about what ISIL may or may not have. Suffice it to say that in every step of our operations, the mitigation of any risk to our personnel is first and foremost on our mind.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: Having been in Afghanistan, I was concerned about the MANPADS. I have seen that ISIL has MANPADS and all the other heavy military assets, such as tanks. That will eventually be a problem for the coalition. They'll be a bigger threat.

I think the air strikes are having an effect on ISIL.

MGen Michael Hood: It's a threat we take very seriously, as I said. We will try to ensure that the aircraft are equipped to deal with those risks or that we plan mission parameters that ensure to the greatest extent possible.... I think it's important to say, though, that any part of our contribution is not risk free. There's no way we can mitigate that risk to zero. It is a dangerous theatre of operation. But we put the welfare of our men and women in uniform first and foremost.

RAdm Gilles Couturier (Director General, International Security Policy, Department of National Defence): The other thing I would add to that, if I may, is that the coalition puts a lot of emphasis on trying to locate, from an intelligence perspective, any indication that those kinds of capabilities are falling into those hands.

Yes, it's a great concern for us in Canada, but it's an overall concern for the coalition. We're certainly putting a lot of effort into understanding and getting as much warning as we can of that kind of capability getting into their hands.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: When you're operating in this theatre of operation, do you also have different types of aircraft, the French, the Portuguese? Do you think that the training that the air force had in Romania with the coalition was helpful?

MGen Michael Hood: I think any training that adds to the capability of our personnel is very valuable. I would certainly put the professionalism and capability of our CF-18 pilots up against any member of the coalition, without a doubt, and I say that very sincerely.

RAdm Gilles Couturier: It also speaks to the interoperability that we have as we go through all of the exercises that we do all year long. The fact that we can now operate together in a kind of operational setting speaks volumes about the training we've been doing.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: What kind of military strategies are ISIL using? You mentioned that they are now dispersing in small units. What is the danger, from the military point of view, for us in future operations?

MGen Michael Hood: Iraqi security forces are going to certainly have some challenges moving forward against a very determined adversary, which is motivated through barbarous ideology that in fact inflicts terror on those who are under some.... Their dispersion presents a different problem for ground forces to deal with, but I'm pretty confident that given the time, support, and training, Iraqi security forces will be able to prevail.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you, General.

That is your time, Mr. Chisu.

Ms. Murray, please.

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Thank you.

General, are you able to advise us as to the projected budget for this six-month mission?

MGen Michael Hood: I'm not, Ms. Murray.

The chief financial officer of the department is in the process of capturing these, and I understand that these will be reported to Parliament at an appropriate time, likely in some months.

Ms. Joyce Murray: Will it be before the six months are up?

Can you give us an estimate of when that will be available?

MGen Michael Hood: No, I'm unable to do that.

Ms. Joyce Murray: Thank you.

What role are our special forces playing? Are they involved with training the Iraqi and Kurdish fighters? Where is this training taking place? Are they providing close combat advising, or are they in a central location?

MGen Michael Hood: We've been focused on the RCAF portion of it, and it's important to remember that we have 69 special operations forces operating out of Erbil, the northern area of Iraq on the map behind you, which are working closely with Kurdish forces. They're in the vicinity of Erbil forward, and working with various peshmerga units in what we call an advise and assist role.

The peshmerga in that area are in essentially defensive positions. It gives us an opportunity, in many cases in a classroom or an open-air setting, to work on basic skills, depending on the forces that we're advising and assisting, but also eventually in the planning, the pre-mission planning, of future operations that the Iraqi security forces may contemplate.

Ms. Joyce Murray: So is this close combat advising at this point?

MGen Michael Hood: I wouldn't say it's close combat advising, no.

Again, certainly in the vicinity of what's recognized as Kurdish front lines...they're not at the front lines, but they have to go where the forces are. It's not risk-free, but it's not close combat. We haven't been involved in supporting them. That's not part of the mandate at this point.

RAdm Gilles Couturier: If I may add on the peshmerga, they are key to the success of that fight; they are one of the most proficient forces in the region. The fact that we have the opportunity to help them get to the point where they can be an effective force in the region is an important role that we see for our special forces.

Ms. Joyce Murray: Thank you.

The Liberals, a month ago, proposed that providing training support could be a unique and special contribution of the Canadian Armed Forces, a military non-combat contribution, since our armed forces were so effective with that in Afghanistan over the four-year period.

Is there a discussion about the armed forces providing additional contribution to training with the peshmerga, or with the Iraqi security forces themselves?

MGen Michael Hood: The mission right now and the parameters of the mission are familiar to all of you. We've been authorized for six months with the air element I've talked about, and the special operations forces. As the situation changes and advice is brought forward from the Chief of the Defence Staff to government, there may very well be other options that are contemplated—but not at this immediate time.

Ms. Joyce Murray: Also, I'm interested in other non-combat roles that our Canadian Armed Forces could play. My understanding is that the air strikes dispersed the open convoys weeks ago, so there may be other ways that Canada can provide more of a contribution. With respect to the humanitarian needs in the area and the civilian distress, is there a need for security for humanitarian assistance, and if so, is that a role that Canada would be able to help with?

• (1640)

MGen Michael Hood: Just let me provide some context first. Certainly, there are and continue to be targets to strike, so this notion that there aren't targets for air strikes is not, in fact, correct at this point.

With respect to security for humanitarian efforts, I'm going to ask my colleague to talk about that in a second, but it's important to note that the Iraqis and the Iraqi security forces don't want our support on the ground in the fight. They actually want to own that fight. They see it as an Iraqi fight to take forward.

Ms. Joyce Murray: I want to clarify that I'm not suggesting a combat role for the Canadian Armed Forces.

In one of the briefings a commentator was quoted as saying that a sophisticated online media and propaganda campaign underpins ISIL's success to date. What is your comment on that statement?

Second, what, if anything, can Canada and our intelligence agencies do to help counter that effectiveness with online propaganda?

MGen Michael Hood: I would agree wholeheartedly that there are many facets and many instruments of power that can be brought to bear in this campaign. The point that you talk of, which I think we'd call the information campaign, is certainly an area that allies recognize they need to address. They need to counter the ideology that is prevalent, that is causing young men and women in the region to fight for ISIL.

With respect to what other entities in the Government of Canada can do, it's not really my place to speak to public safety or the other services that are involved in that. I'm sure that would be considered in due course.

The Chair: Thank you, General.

The time is up, Ms. Murray.

Ms. Gallant, please.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I'm really pleased that the opposition Liberals have decided to support what our special forces are doing on the ground there.

With respect to the special forces, what sorts of successes can you describe that they've had in training the Kurds and the peshmergas?

MGen Michael Hood: There are a number of forces in the area; “peshmerga” is a generalized term. There are Kurdish security forces; there are peshmerga, which would be more akin to, I think, a militia. There are doctors and lawyers in Erbil who take their turn on the front line in a very traditional, defensive piece. There are varying levels of expertise there, including very high capability, as my colleague spoke to.

In terms of the successes that are taking place, we have a very willing partner who is actually asking us for as much as we can possibly do in the support to raise them for what I think they recognize is the eventual ground part of the campaign that they are going to play a large role in.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: How transient are the forces that they're training and working with? You mentioned that doctors and lawyers take their turn on the front line. Are they dealing with the same people for a week, several weeks, and then new people trickle in and people who have been there trickle out?

MGen Michael Hood: I think in large part the forces are static. I was trying to refer to an entity to give you a sense of the varying levels of capability and experience in terms of the type of mentoring that you could provide. But again, they're a hardened force. They've been at this for some time.

I think we've had experience. We're getting to know them better. We're getting to understand what their needs are. We'll continue to improve our level of support to them as we get more experienced in working with them.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: What have our special forces said about working with the Kurds?

MGen Michael Hood: I've only spoken with the commander of special operations force command in a broader, more general sense. I wouldn't have a vignette or a touchstone to bring to you on those lines. I can certainly try to get one for you, though.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Okay.

With respect to the capabilities of ISIL, they have heavy weapons, tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and tactical units. Are there any ISIL targets that are easier than others to hit with air strikes?

• (1645)

MGen Michael Hood: I think where you're trying to take me is to delve into the tactics and the rest of the ground campaign. We really talk in terms of deliberate or dynamic targets. Dynamic targets are those that aren't static. A deliberate target could be a command post, a checkpoint—something that we know is there and is not likely to move.

In that sense, a deliberate target would be easier, whereas a dynamic target is something that is not necessarily static.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: The dynamic targets are tougher to hit. Is that what you're saying?

MGen Michael Hood: Generally speaking.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Now, when we look at the map you've provided, recognizing that this is more or less our theatre of operations, would you be able to describe how the flow, the areas of influence, of ISIL came to pass? Was it centralized and then spread from the different directions? How did these two bands form?

MGen Michael Hood: Those red bands actually represent the two principal routes between Syria and into Baghdad. They converge at Baghdad. If you look closely at a map of Iraq, you'll notice that most of the cities and the infrastructure are really centralized on those two bands. Iraq has wide swaths of desert—for instance, to the south of that bottom band—where there simply isn't anyone there, really.

As to their area of influence, it's in fact the direct route they've taken between Syria and Baghdad.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Okay: so it's the areas that are mostly populated.

Given that this is our theatre of operation or our area of concern, if we were to look to where ISIL's influence extends further—because that may have some sort of impact on our operations in Iraq—how far would those bands go into Syria and other surrounding countries?

MGen Michael Hood: Most of northern Syria and those lines of communication are under the complete control of ISIL or ISIL-friendly entities. There is a Kurdish part in northern Syria, and then you would actually end up with regime capabilities south of Aleppo. I don't have it on this map, because I was focusing my comments on Iraq.

It's safe to say that a very large part of Syria is under ISIL control.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gallant.

Mr. Harris, I understand you're sharing the time with Mr. Chicoine.

Mr. Jack Harris: That's correct. I have just an initial question.

General Hood, I was rather surprised, I guess, at your answer to Ms. Murray about the question of cost estimates. On October 17 General Lawson told the media, in a press briefing, that the cost estimates for the military contribution had actually been provided to cabinet. So why would you tell us that the CFO is actually preparing them, giving us the impression that there are no such things as cost estimates available?

That bothers me a little bit. Is this maybe a public relations gesture of some sort?

MGen Michael Hood: Mr. Harris—

Mr. Jack Harris: I mean, if these estimates exist, either we're being denied them or there is some other story.

MGen Michael Hood: I've said previously, before this committee, that I'm not, in my position, responsible for the costs of the Department of National Defence. It is the CFO—

Mr. Jack Harris: I understand that, but the information seems to be that they do exist. You may not know them. Does General Vance know them, do you think?

MGen Michael Hood: Estimates are always provided in general terms when different activities are contemplated, to give a sense of what costs may be. Those differ, often quite greatly, from what we expend on those operations, so we use them just as a touch point, but then they're updated with real costs coming in and then reported to government and the minister at the appropriate time.

The Chair: Monsieur Chicoine.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank the witnesses for joining us and shedding some light on the Iraq mission.

Major-General, in your presentation, you talked about Canada's training mission, which began on September 5 and lasted 30 days. I would like you to provide us with more details on that mission and tell us what were its concrete results.

● (1650)

MGen Michael Hood: Sorry, I understand French, but I did not really understand the question. Could you please repeat it?

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Certainly.

I would like you to elaborate on the 30-day training mission and tell us what its concrete results were.

MGen Michael Hood: A 30-day mandate was given to our Special Operations Forces. We said that we would report on our progress after working with the Peshmerga. We discussed this issue with the government, and a decision was made to establish the air task force. Both the Special Operations Forces and the Canadian Royal Air Force now have a six-month mission.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Okay, but do you have some more information on the results of that training mission? The mission helped the Peshmerga, among others, but do you have more information on its concrete results?

RAAdm Gilles Couturier: The goal of the 30-day mission was to send our Special Operations Forces on site to assess what kind of a contribution we could make on the Iraqi soil. We began by holding discussions with the Iraqis to ensure they were open to this mission. We also held discussions with the U.S. forces, which are currently deployed in the region.

That initial contact led to a general plan setting out our potential contribution in the region through our Special Operations Forces. We submitted that plan to the government for its consideration.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Canada participated in the transportation of ammunitions and weapons to help the Peshmerga forces fight ISIL.

What were the results of that participation?

Are we still involved in the transportation of weapons to help the Peshmerga?

RAAdm Gilles Couturier: We have fulfilled our contribution commitment. General Hood provided the exact number of missions.

In close collaboration with the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, we delivered the military equipment to Iraqi forces, in Erbil. They now control that equipment and distribute it to those who need it most in the fight against ISIL.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you.

Rear-Admiral Kirby, of the American army, said that the United States expected this mission to last several years—so much longer than six months or a year. I would like you to comment on the U.S. army's forecast.

Considering that we are coming out of a conflict that lasted 10 years and was among the deadliest we have been involved in, is our army ready to engage in a conflict likely to last several years?

[English]

The Chair: Answer briefly, please, General.

[Translation]

MGen Michael Hood: When our mission was approved and announced by the government, a time frame of six months was provided, but I think that the coalition's mission will last much longer. We are actually stopping the advancement of ISIL, but Iraqi forces will have to be trained and ready to launch missions in a ground war perspective. I think that will take more than six months.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, General.

Mr. Williamson, please.

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General, it's good to see you here today. Thank you for attending.

I have a couple of questions I'm hoping you'll be able to answer to shed some light on concerning the situation on the ground in Iraq. I thought your description of the two red bands was very helpful. Do you have any idea what percentage of the Iraqi population lives under that ISIL-controlled territory?

MGen Michael Hood: I wouldn't want to hazard a guess. I will tell you that Mosul, which is under ISIL control, is the second largest city in Iraq, so certainly a significant proportion. But there certainly is a very heavy Iraqi population to the east of Baghdad down toward Kuwait. I don't have the specific numbers with me.

•(1655)

Mr. John Williamson: I'm going back to my recollection from the Gulf War and Gulf War II. Is most of the refining capability on the coast near Kuwait? What kind of refining capability do you find in those ISIL territories?

MGen Michael Hood: A significant oil refining capability is in that red banded area. You may have heard the oil refineries in Beiji supplied 80% of the oil to the western part of the country. Beiji is near Tikrit on that map. While there are significant oil refining capabilities in the south around Basra and on the coast, it is fair to say that it is distributed widely, so they would have that under control.

Mr. John Williamson: Okay, thank you.

When our Royal Canadian Air Force is in theatre, how does it operate? This is going where Mr. Harris went. Do we operate on a grid formation where there's air space that is Canada's or are we working more in collaboration with our allies? How does the theatre work in terms of our air space versus others? Is it a grid format or how would you—

MGen Michael Hood: No, not at all. It certainly depends where the air activity is going to be. Allies are interchangeable, by and large. Our ISR assets will not only operate and support Canadian missions, they'll support other allied missions. It really is interchangeable and that air tasking order, that process I was talking

about, assigns targeting and specific areas for operations. It indicates where our tankers would position themselves in the air space and our tankers are providing fuel to a number of different platforms, not just Canadian.

It's very dynamic, it's far from a set grid box, as you were suggesting.

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you.

It had been mentioned that ISIL has now split into smaller groups. What do you reckon their objective is now, given that they don't appear to be on the move the way they were before? Clearly, they have significant territory already and sizable cities under their control. Is there a sense of their military objective?

MGen Michael Hood: Their objective is unchanged. Their objective is Baghdad as the eastern front of their view of what their caliphate may or may not look like. So, while we talk about dispersed, while it may be a little more challenging for them to take that on, that remains their objective, to the best of our understanding.

Mr. John Williamson: What do you think their strategy is? Is it to attempt to wait out allied air force and lie low? Is it to attempt to advance when they can? What's the sense? Are we seeing less of the movement now and what do you think their strategy is to try to move forward and move around or into Baghdad?

MGen Michael Hood: I don't think I would venture to hypothesize what their strategy may be. Nonetheless, they remain committed to moving forward. We're seeing advances. They're being pushed back in other areas. They're a significant fighting entity even in a more dispersed view that I spoke to, but I wouldn't be able to talk about their evolving tactics.

Mr. John Williamson: You mentioned that Iraqi forces are not keen to see, I guess we'll call them western ground troops. I don't want to misquote you here or misspeak on your behalf, but is that accurate?

MGen Michael Hood: The Iraqi security forces want to be responsible for the fight.

RAdm Gilles Couturier: But I wouldn't say only western, though. They don't want any foreign forces.

Mr. John Williamson: That's fair enough.

I'll come back to you gentlemen. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Harris, go ahead please.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Chair.

Perhaps we can follow up on that, in terms of the capability of the Iraqi army. Mr. Chisu talked about the large forces and equipment that it had, although in looking at a paper prepared by the Library of Parliament, we're talking 60 or 70 tanks and perhaps a large number of Humvees. The army that they defeated appeared to have just disappeared by virtue of the commanders disappearing.

We read about what was left behind by the Americans, a million-soldier ground force owned by the Iraqi army. Is that the army we're talking about that's going to take the ground fight? That seems to be a very large number of soldiers when we're talking about maybe 20,000 or 50,000 fighters that ISIS has both in Iraq and in Syria.

•(1700)

MGen Michael Hood: In the numbers that I'm aware of, the size of the Iraqi security forces before ISIL came across, would have been about 250,000. It is—

Mr. Jack Harris: Iraqi soldiers, or...

MGen Michael Hood: It is the Iraqi security forces writ large. That was evident. It was about 250,000. There's no doubt that, in the initial attacks and essentially the withdrawal, those numbers have significantly reduced. The actual fighting force of the Iraqis is significantly less than that right now.

Mr. Jack Harris: In terms of their ability to reform, is there a command issue with respect to the ability to put commanders in the field who are trusted and capable of leading?

MGen Michael Hood: No, I think that what we're working with now...our view of what the Iraqi security forces look like right now is that they are capable, the challenge being that they have not been training to the extent you would expect in advance of major combat operations. Certainly, part of the strategy is for allies and the coalition to provide a level of training to Iraqi security forces such that they could take the fight for themselves.

Mr. Jack Harris: Again to follow on from Mr. Williams' questions about the coordination of airspace, is there an AWACS running air traffic control? Is that how it's commanded on the ground? Or is that done out of Tampa as well?

MGen Michael Hood: It's a mixture of ground radar, but there are air assets from a number of different countries, AWACS and Australian Wedgetail, for example.

Mr. Jack Harris: One of the issues that has come up is the need for Canada to obtain further munitions and equipment, these smart bomb kits, etc. One question raised was the cuts to stockpile that Canada had, despite the urging of Public Works. Has that proven difficult to manage? Can you tell us about that? Supposedly there was a 38% cut to stockpiles of Canadian munitions. Has that been corrected, and has that resulted in a greater cost?

MGen Michael Hood: In the context of the present campaign that we're in and the smart bombs that I spoke of, there certainly is no shortage. We have plenty of them, and they're in theatre and ready to be used appropriately. There certainly is no short-term or long-term impact with respect to our CF weapons.

Mr. Jack Harris: I suppose I have a couple of minutes left, do I?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Mr. Jack Harris: I have a minute and a half. Perhaps I'll use it to go back to the cost issue.

We've heard rough estimates in the neighbourhood of \$300 million. We've seen reports about Libya in the range of \$350 million as the actual cost of that mission here. I guess the question that I have, if we are talking about costs in that range, is what the effect is on other defence department programs. We've already had complaints about the military having difficulty meeting training requirements and readiness because of the budget cuts and that matter. Are you anticipating anything like that? Or is there any—

Mr. James Bezan: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, and I've brought this up numerous times in the past, there are certain

questions that witnesses aren't able to answer. I refer to pages 1068-1069 in chapter 20 of O'Brien and Bosc; it says:

...committees ordinarily accept the reasons that a public servant gives for declining to answer a specific question or series of questions which involve the giving of a legal opinion, which may be perceived as a conflict with the witness' responsibility to the Minister, which are outside of their own area of responsibility, or which might affect business transactions.

I think in this situation, budget questions are outside the area of responsibility of General Hood and his colleagues.

The Chair: Point made.

Can you simplify your question on reform?

Mr. Jack Harris: As a member of the joint staff you obviously have issues involving different aspects of the military. Do you have a concern, and does the staff have a concern, that other aspects of the military might be affected by it?

The Chair: We have a point of order.

Mr. James Bezan: I have a point of order as it's not relevant to the study at hand. It's not relevant to the issue at hand, which is talking about ISIL and our efforts in Iraq.

•(1705)

Mr. Jack Harris: The cost of the mission is relevant to the operation of the department of defence.

Mr. James Bezan: I think I have the floor, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, point made.

Mr. Harris, the witness is free to answer or to decline.

MGen Michael Hood: I would simply say, Mr. Harris, and I think we discussed this in my last piece here, that the impact of those flying errors and the rest are within what we'd expect to be able to manage. It's not having any impact on any other commitments at this time.

The Chair: Thank you, General.

That's time, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Bezan, please, five minutes.

Mr. James Bezan: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I want to thank you gentlemen for coming in and providing your expertise today. I hope that you convey back to everyone in the Canadian Armed Forces whether they are in theatre, dealing with the ISIL threat, or they are back at home in supporting roles, that we are very appreciative of the work that they are doing and the courage and bravery that they are showing in this incredible operation.

Major-General Hood, you mentioned in your comments how in the 25 original flights we delivered over 1.6 million pounds of cargo to the Kurds and Iraqi security forces that were donated by Albania and the Czech Republic. Can you talk about what some of that military equipment is and how it is being used?

MGen Michael Hood: First of all, Mr. Bezan, thank you very much for your comments in opening. I will certainly be sure to pass that on and we appreciate the support.

I can speak to specifically what was carried out. I can't speak to where it's seeing action at this moment. We've handed this over to Iraqi security forces. It's a varied mix of general military aid, which includes a number of munitions. The Kurdish peshmerga use weapons that were similar to what former Soviet republics will have used, hence Albania and the Czech Republic had quite a large stock of a specific calibre of bullets, 7.62 instead of 5.56 that we use; rocket-propelled grenades, typically in a small arms regime; as well as some military aid, sleeping bags, and equipment that would prove useful to them.

Mr. James Bezan: That was stuff that was incredibly handy for them. They are trained on it, they know how to use it, and there's easy adaptability, which is different from bringing in new technology and having to train. In some cases the heavier armaments would take months to learn versus putting it into direct use in the fight against ISIL.

Some of the questions that we've already had related to the Iraqi security forces. We had a number of members of the Iraqi security forces who surrendered. A lot of them went and joined ISIL and that's where they get a lot of their military capabilities from and command structures, because of a number of generals who treasonously went to the other side. My understanding is that they also took with them a lot of U.S.-built equipment. There is also Russian-origin equipment in the hands of ISIL. There's a lot of Balkans military equipment that had been provided through other sources, and I mentioned a stockpile of armaments coming from Libya. Can you talk about what capabilities they do have and how that has played into their success in the region?

MGen Michael Hood: I can.

I should probably just specify the previous points because I don't want there to be a misunderstanding. Some of the senior members of ISIL are former Baath Party Iraqi senior officers who at the end of the Second Gulf War would have been no longer employed in the Iraqi military as part of the de-Baathification. So while they have the experience it's not like they were in the Iraqi security forces yesterday and walked across.

Some of the equipment that ISIL has they brought with them from Syria, so there's some former Syrian equipment. In overrunning certain positions they do have some Iraqi equipment, which is of U.S. origin. But the technical expertise to maintain them at that level... you're starting to see those slowly degrade as well as the fact of coalition air strikes degrading that. There's a wide range of equipment that you would have seen from tanks to artillery weapons. There are also technical vehicles, which would just be a typical pickup truck with a heavy weapon in the back. There is a wide range of source material in that case.

RAdm Gilles Couturier: Sir, if I might add to that, when ISIL moved kind of east towards Iraq, some U.S. equipment was left behind in some areas. We all saw in the press the talk about some of the banks that had been robbed in order to help ISIL finance their work, so that's part of those levels of equipment. There were no high-level armaments left behind by the Americans, but there were some trucks and armoured vehicles, as Mike just mentioned.

• (1710)

The Chair: Mr. Harris, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We have a report here prepared by the parliamentary information research service dealing with the equipment that ISIL has, it's believed, from sources. I notice that they have access to, as mentioned, maybe 60 or 70 battle tanks, but they also have MANPADS, shoulder-launched, both U.S.-made and Russian-made, and anti-aircraft guns. I don't know if these so-called MANPADS, the portable ones, have the range to go near our F-18s or the C-140s, but what about the anti-aircraft guns? Is there a concern about the safety of our air crews in these circumstances?

MGen Michael Hood: I think I mentioned earlier, Mr. Harris, that certainly no military operation is without risk, but our intelligence sources in the military typically have access to the same type of information that you're reading there. We have an understanding of the range and capability of those weapons, so to the greatest extent possible, we would ensure that we limit the exposure of Canadian Forces assets into the effective ranges of those weapons.

Mr. Jack Harris: Would your intelligence and capability for surveillance have knowledge of where these might be located, particularly the anti-aircraft guns?

MGen Michael Hood: If we know where they are, or if the coalition knew where they were, they're being hit. These are very mobile weapons, as you would expect, but certainly it is an area of concern that we take seriously. I guarantee you that it's probably near the top of that prioritized target list that we spoke of earlier.

Mr. Jack Harris: One of the issues that's of concern as well is that I know ISIS relies on foreign fighters and a heavy recruitment operation carried on in large measure in the Middle East, but also internationally through the use of the Internet. I know that some countries have been active in looking at strategies to deal with that. I read a couple of days ago about a conference that was held in Kuwait, where the U.S., Britain, France, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, etc., were all participating. General John Allen from the U.S. was present. But we didn't participate in that.

They were trying to look at strategies for dealing with the recruiting operation by playing a role in the Internet. Is that something, whether the military is involved in that or not...? Canada wasn't there, which I find a little bit surprising. Is that part of the strategy for dealing with ISIS in Iraq as well? Obviously it's not strictly a military hardware operation, but we do have CSEC at work, and I guess the question is, is Canada involved in that aspect of it as well?

MGen Michael Hood: Certainly, as I mentioned previously, when we talk about lines of operation in the campaign, that's an area that is of concern, that is, the radicalization and the bringing forward of these folks through various means. I'm not familiar with the conference you're speaking to, nor can I confirm whether or not Canadian participation was there. I know that the coalition writ large is considering options to take advantage of certain capabilities they may have, but in this case, Mr. Harris, the Canadian Forces is not.

Mr. Jack Harris: I know that Canadian Foreign Affairs indicated that Canada was not present. I'm just wondering on the military side, and particularly through CSEC, is that something that is being coordinated with the other coalition partners as a means of assisting in preventing or, to use the favourite phrase, "degrading" the ability of ISIL to recruit foreign fighters in the manner that they have been through the Internet? It seems to me to be an area of grave concern. But here's my question, and perhaps Rear-Admiral Couturier could answer this. Is this something that, from an intelligence response, is being actively pursued?

• (1715)

MGen Michael Hood: Sir, I would have to take that question under advisement. I'm not aware, but I'll take that question under advisement and make sure that we get you the answer.

The Chair: That is your time.

Thank you very much, General.

Mr. Bezan, for five minutes.

Mr. James Bezan: For clarification, we're still in second round, are we not?

The Chair: We're just completing the second round now, and Mr. Larose is next.

Mr. James Bezan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

General Hood, I wonder if you could talk about the upgrades that have been done most recently, in 2010, to the CF-18 Hornets, as well as the recent upgrades to the Aurora, and how that new technology and capability is assisting in theatre right now.

MGen Michael Hood: I can, in very brief terms; I'm not going to speak to the actual capabilities of the aircraft.

Both of those cases, the CF-18 and the technology in that aircraft, and the CP-140 with largely Canadian technology, are at the top end of capabilities that are available in theatre. The latest update to the Block III Aurora has a very effective overland ISR capability that is certainly the envy of some allies, as well.

I'd say that they are top-end capabilities.

Mr. James Bezan: Thank you.

I'm just wondering if any of you would comment on what would be happening on the ground today if the coalition had not engaged with an air combat role in the last 30 days.

MGen Michael Hood: Again, I wouldn't want to hypothesize too far—

Mr. James Bezan: I think it's fair—

MGen Michael Hood: —but without anything to blunt that advance—we've seen the air strikes being quite effective at that—I could imagine that they'd be much closer to reaching their objectives.

RAdm Gilles Couturier: To add to that, the Baghdad element is key to the future of Iraq.

One other thing that the Iraqi defence forces are doing is concentrating their main capabilities in that region in order to protect what they see as their vital ground. Without our going in there, one could only imagine where Baghdad would be today.

Mr. James Bezan: Okay, so the air strikes that we delivered over the weekend, on Sunday, were in defence of positions around Fallujah. The ISIL terrorists are trying to get into that area and push towards Baghdad, and it's because of air support that the Iraqi security forces have been able to push them back.

RAdm Gilles Couturier: The element here is that this is all part of the overall campaign plan to make sure that Baghdad is not being seized. The fact that they were using construction equipment to get rid of some of the damming that affected the water allocation within the region certainly affected the effectiveness of the troops on the ground.

Mr. James Bezan: Of course, the news is always reporting on what is happening in Kobani, in Syria, which is outside of our area of engagement, and on what's happening around Baghdad.

Is the Royal Canadian Air Force engaged as well in surveillance and sending up fighter jets in northern Iraq in support of the peshmerga forces in the north?

MGen Michael Hood: Our area of operations is Iraq writ large. If a target were to come up that was in Mosul, for example, which is in the region that you speak of, and it was assigned to us, it met our collateral damage estimate, and was approved, it would be struck.

There are no limits on the use of Canadian assets within Iraq.

Mr. James Bezan: Canada gleaned a lot of expertise and information from both Libya and Afghanistan.

How are those lessons learned being applied to what we're doing in this coalition battle in Iraq?

MGen Michael Hood: We spoke earlier, answering Mr. Chisu's question with respect to the professionalism of the Royal Canadian Air Force in this case.

The lessons we've learned in previous operations, at all levels—tactical, operational, and strategic—are always rolled into the subsequent training activity, and then into the operations that we do. I wouldn't be able to pull out a specific one, but I'm confident in saying that the lessons learned process that we spoke about previously is very active. So all of the lessons that we learned previously would be rolled in for today.

• (1720)

Mr. James Bezan: Okay.

Can you talk about how our contribution in this coalition and our fight against ISIL compare to the contribution that we made in the conflict in Libya, for example?

MGen Michael Hood: Well, I don't think any two coalitions are the same, although there are some of the same actors in both. Our contribution is not dissimilar, although you'll recall we had Royal Canadian Navy ships in the vicinity along with the Sea King helicopter. It is similar in size and scope. We've increased the size of our CP-140 contribution, and the Block III aircraft is now completely operational. We're bringing even more to bear in this campaign than we were able to do in Libya, for example.

The Chair: Thank you, General.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Larose, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Jean-François Larose: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A lot is being said about conventional targets, but I would rather talk about unconventional targets. I think our fellow Canadians are concerned about the fact that they are now affected in their homes, through the Internet. In committee, we have often discussed establishing something of an army that would be tasked specifically with handling Internet issues.

What are currently our capacities in that area?

Earlier, you talked about collaboration with the Department of Public Safety, but the situation may be a bit more advanced. The map presents a very conventional situation, but we are facing unconventional enemies. They can reach our children directly at home and create local cells.

Does your strategic planning involve specific targets related to the Internet? Is anything being done to limit the access those enemies have to the Internet? Is any kind of equipment targeted? What concrete measures are you taking in this respect?

MGen Michael Hood: In the Canadian Armed Forces, we have our own defensive capacity regarding the Internet and cyberspace. We protect that area for the Department of National Defence. It is the responsibility of the Department of Public Safety to deal with the issues you mentioned. This question has to do with Canadians, so it is not my place to answer it. Our capacity at the Department of Defence is mostly defensive.

RAdm Gilles Couturier: There are two aspects—national and international. We are clearly involved on an international level.

Mr. Jean-François Larose: Absolutely, but you are directly involved at the source. You are in contact with those individuals, whether you like it or not, given all the complexity of the situation.

Do the Americans and the coalition have a capacity? Is some sort of collaboration established in that area?

MGen Michael Hood: If we found out an ISIL headquarters was using the Internet in its operations, that could be a target the coalition would attack because it may be considered as training for the ISIL army. If the target is legitimate, the Royal Canadian Air Force can attack it.

Mark, do you want to talk about legitimate targets?

Col Mark Gendron (Deputy Judge Advocate General, Operations, Department of National Defence): Legitimate targets, by their nature, location and objective, represent a real contribution, in military terms. If the target was an ISIL headquarters, it could be attacked because we are involved in an armed conflict.

Mr. Jean-François Larose: In any conflict, enemy's logistics are definitely a target. The Internet provides the enemy with candidates, support or media coverage. I think this should be a priority and not a possibility. Canada wants to maintain a defensive approach, and I understand that. However, now that we have unfortunately become a target—in other words, we have failed in other areas—this should be a priority target.

● (1725)

RAdm Gilles Couturier: Earlier, we spoke with Mr. Harris about General Allen, who is favourable to another combat element against ISIL. That element consists in addressing some of the challenges you mentioned in a context that is not strictly of a military nature, but affects the government as a whole. This concerns financing, the Internet and the way the message is disseminated, not only in the region, but also around the world. So it should not just be limited to the military aspect and CENTCOM, in which we are much more involved. General Allen, who works at the U.S. State Department, is studying this complex aspect.

The Chair: Please be brief, Mr. Larose.

Mr. Jean-François Larose: Okay.

I feel reassured, but I think that everyone would like more reassurance. Seeing the big picture is nice, but the priority also consists in seeing what concrete actions are being taken.

RAdm Gilles Couturier: As General Hood and I explained, the Canadian Armed Forces have a defensive capacity. We defend our own systems, and not all systems.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, General Hood, Admiral Couturier, and Colonel Gendron, for your contributions today. I think I speak on behalf of all members of the committee in that we hope to see you again with regular updates over the coming months. But thank you, certainly, for your appearance before us today.

Do you have a point of order, Ms. Murray?

Ms. Joyce Murray: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, in terms of regular updates, may I suggest that the committee organize weekly briefings and open them up to other members of Parliament so that all of our colleagues can benefit from the update and have their concerns for our armed forces members be expressed, and hopefully assuaged by senior members of the Canadian Armed Forces?

The Chair: Thank you. I recognize your request. We can perhaps talk about that during committee business on Thursday.

But for now, thank you again, gentlemen.

This meeting is adjourned.

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