

US prepares strikes against Islamists in Iraq

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27 December 2013

Two years after President Barack Obama declared that his administration had ended the catastrophic US war in Iraq “responsibly... leaving behind a sovereign, stable and self-reliant” government, the US has rushed emergency shipments of Hellfire missiles to Baghdad and appears to be preparing for a possible renewal of direct military intervention in the form of drone missile attacks.

These measures are a response to an appeal from the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the *New York Times* reported Thursday, and come in the face of a rise in violence to a level not seen since the US military “surge” of 2008, with over 8,000 Iraqis having lost their lives over the last year.

A shipment of 75 Hellfire missiles arrived in Iraq last week, according to the *Times* report. The Pentagon is also set to deliver dozens of reconnaissance drones to the Baghdad regime in the coming year, along with F-16 fighters and Apache helicopter gunships. US intelligence is also providing targeting information for Iraqi air strikes.

Military experts cited by the *Times*, however, expressed skepticism that the Iraqi military, even with such material assistance, will prove capable of defeating a growing Al Qaeda-affiliated insurgency in the country’s predominantly Sunni Anbar province.

The prospect for a more direct US military intervention through the launching of a drone airstrike campaign has been raised in recent months by Iraq’s foreign minister, Hoshyar Zebari.

Last Sunday, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki signaled the escalating US involvement in Iraq, declaring that Al Qaeda-connected insurgents were “seeking to gain control of territory inside the borders of Iraq” and describing these elements as the “common enemy of the United States and the Republic of Iraq, and a threat to the greater Middle East region.”

This “threat,” however, is one of Washington’s own

making, and the “common enemy” in Iraq has been the de facto proxy force of US imperialism’s war for regime-change in neighboring Syria.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, known by the initials ISIS, has claimed responsibility for some of the latest terrorist attacks inside Iraq, including the bombing on Monday of two television stations in Baghdad in which five journalists died. The group was suspected of being behind the horrific Christmas Day bombings in Christian areas of the Iraqi capital that killed at least 38 on Wednesday, including 24 who died from a bomb that went off as they left Christmas mass.

The ISIS had its origins in Iraq during the US military occupation of the country. Its resurgence has come as a byproduct of the US-backed war for regime-change in Syria, across Iraq’s eastern border, where it has battled forces loyal to the Syrian government and seized swathes of territory. Last month, the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) described the ISIS, which includes thousands of foreign jihadis from as far away as Russia and Western Europe, as “the strongest group in Northern Syria.”

From Syria, the group has dispatched suicide bombers to attack government targets in Iraq as well as Shia and Christian communities.

The group has also revived its training camps and hideouts in the western desert of Anbar province. In an ambush there last Saturday, it killed some 18 Iraqi military personnel, including a major general who commanded the local army division and several other senior officers.

On Tuesday, the Iraqi government ordered the military to close the country’s border with Syria as part of a major military operation against Al Qaeda-associated forces in the area dubbed “Avenge the Leader Mohammed,” after Maj. Gen. Mohammad al-Karawi, the division commander killed in last Saturday’s attack.

Iraqi Defense Ministry spokesman Mohammed al-Askari told the AFP news agency that the military had detected “the arrival of weapons and advanced equipment from Syria to the desert of western Anbar and the border of Nineveh province.” He added that intelligence indicated that “whenever there is pressure on armed groups in Syria, they withdraw to Iraq ... to regroup and then carry out terrorist operations in the two countries.”

The US aid to the counterinsurgency operation by the Iraqi military is being carried out in conjunction with the reconfiguration of US policy toward the Syrian civil war in the wake of the Obama administration’s pullback from direct US military intervention last September and its reaching of agreements both on the chemical disarmament of the Syrian regime and the Iranian nuclear program.

Washington has also been forced to confront the rout of the so-called “moderate” forces of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which it had officially been backing against the government of President Bashar al-Assad, and the growing dominance of Islamists of various stripes among the so-called “rebels.” Earlier this month, the Obama administration cut off aid to the Syrian armed opposition after Islamist guerrillas of the recently formed Islamic Front overran a compound and a dozen weapons warehouses of the FSA’s Supreme Military Council in Babisqa, just south of the strategic Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey. US-backed commander Gen. Salim Idriss, the titular head of the FSA, was sent fleeing across the border into Turkey.

With the FSA and its political arm, the National Coalition, exposed as representing virtually nothing outside of a clique of Syrian exiles tied to the CIA and other western intelligence agencies, the Obama administration instructed its Syrian envoy Robert Ford to make contact with the Islamic Front in the hope of developing it as a Western-aligned “third force” between Al Qaeda and the Syrian regime.

Of immediate concern is next month’s US-Russian brokered talks, known as “Geneva II,” in which representatives of the Syrian government have agreed to sit down with opposition delegates. The negotiators for both sides are supposed to be named today, December 27. The problem confronting the US and the other Western powers is that the forces they have backed are being exposed as having virtually no

support within Syria itself, either among those carrying out attacks against the regime or in the society at large.

The Islamic Front, which is apparently funded by Saudi Arabia, rejected the US overtures and has reportedly established a close working relationship with the ISIS and the Al Nusra Front, another Al Qaeda-associated force in Syria.

In backing the Iraqi regime, which has aligned itself with the Assad government in Syria and the Iranian government against the Sunni Islamists, the Obama administration is attempting to at least contain the catastrophic sectarian civil war it has unleashed upon Syria. There remain deep divisions in Washington over how to handle this debacle, with some elements still denouncing Obama for failing to make good on his vow that Assad would be toppled, and others arguing that Assad staying in power would be preferable to the fall of Syria to the jihadists.

In aiding the corrupt, sectarian and dictatorial government of al-Maliki, however, Washington is only deepening the crisis in the region. Al Qaeda’s resurgence in Iraq is driven by not only the US-backed war in neighboring Syria, but also by the political marginalization of and heavy-handed repression against Iraq’s Sunni minority.

In launching the latest offensive in Anbar, Prime Minister al-Maliki issued a simultaneous threat to unleash a bloodbath against an ongoing sit-in protest in Ramadi, Anbar’s largest city. In a statement broadcast on Iraqi television last Sunday, al-Maliki declared that the sit-in “has turned into a headquarters for the leadership of Al Qaeda.” He demanded that all those not involved in “sabotage” evacuate the protest camp “so that Al Qaeda stays alone,” adding that protesters had a “very short period” in which they could escape the implied threat of repression.

Last April, the army raided a similar Sunni protest encampment in Hawija, west of Kirkuk, leaving at least 42 people dead and 153 wounded. In clashes that followed over the next two days, hundreds more were killed.



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