

In Baghdad, Kerry threatens US military action

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24 June 2014

Speaking at the end of a day-long series of meetings in Baghdad, US Secretary of State John Kerry warned Monday that President Obama could order military strikes against Sunni militants without waiting for the political restructuring of the Iraqi government that Washington has been demanding.

Kerry underscored the debacle facing the regime of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which has lost control of a third of the country's territory to a Sunni uprising headed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an Islamic fundamentalist group with roots in Al Qaeda.

Indicating that US military action could come quickly, Kerry said that any decision by Obama to order an attack should not be considered an act of "support for the existing prime minister or for one sect or another."

Pentagon officials also announced Monday that the Iraqi government had agreed to provide immunity from prosecution for all US military personnel deployed to Iraq in the course of the present crisis. This was the principal issue that blocked the conclusion of a Status of Forces Agreement between the US and Iraq in 2011, leading to the complete removal of all US troops from the country.

The US military has insisted on having such an agreement in place, ratified by the Iraqi parliament, to insure that no US officers or soldiers could face prosecution for war crimes. With that obstacle cleared, the 300 US Special Forces troops ordered to Iraq by Obama will begin arriving later this week to review the status of Iraqi Army units and gather targeting information for bomb and missile strikes.

Referring to the ISIS offensive, Kerry said, "They do pose a threat," adding, "They cannot be given safe haven anywhere." Given that the group controls significant territory in both eastern Syria and western Iraq, this statement amounts to a declaration that the US is preparing military action against Syria as well.

Underscoring the threat of a wider war, Israeli warplanes and missiles struck nine targets within Syria Monday, the biggest military action by Israel against Syria in the three years of mounting civil war in that country. The Israel Defense Forces claimed the attack was retaliation for an incident in which an Israeli teenager was killed near the Syrian border, allegedly by an anti-tank missile. The IDF policy is to treat any armed attack from Syria, whether conducted by Assad supporters or rebels, as an official government action and to target the Syrian military in response.

On the day of Kerry's visit to the Iraqi capital, ISIS forces were consolidating their hold on nearly the entire western border of Iraq, after capturing key positions in a series of bloody battles on Saturday night and Sunday. Insurgents seized the towns of Qaim and al-Waleed, the last major Baghdad-controlled crossings into Syria.

Another ISIS force took Rutba, in the southwest corner of Anbar province, and attacked the town of Turabil, the main border crossing point into Jordan.

If the ISIS forces continue moving south, they will reach the Iraqi border with Saudi Arabia, which, in alliance with the United States, has financed and armed the organization and other Sunni Islamist groups as part of the operation in Syria.

There are no longer any effective Iraqi military forces along the entire stretch of border with Syria. The only remaining crossing point between Iraq and Syria not under ISIS control is held by the peshmerga, the militia force loyal to the Kurdish regional government in northern Iraq.

Iraqi military officials said they were trying to make a last stand in Sunni-populated Anbar province by concentrating their forces in the town of Haditha—site of one of the most notorious US war crimes during the occupation—and also the location of Iraq's largest dam, controlling the flow of water for the Euphrates River,

whose valley comprises the bulk of arable land in Iraq.

The conditions under which the US secretary of state visited Baghdad demonstrate the precarious state of the Maliki regime and its American patrons. Kerry was conveyed secretly to the center of the city and filmed descending from his helicopter wearing a flak jacket in a scene reminiscent of the last days of the US puppet regime in Vietnam. He did not spend the night in the Iraqi capital, instead flying to Amman, Jordan, where armed attacks were believed less likely.

Kerry met with Maliki and his top military and political aides, reportedly emphasizing the necessity for a political restructuring that would likely include the replacement of the prime minister by a Shiite figure less hated by the Sunni minority, and the incorporation of Sunni tribal and political leaders into the government. He later met with the leaders of Sunni, Kurdish and Shiite parties, including both allies of Maliki and bitter opponents.

Maliki has so far rebuffed demands that he step down, seeking instead to mobilize Shiite religious leaders and sectarian militias to bolster the crumbling military apparatus. On Saturday, tens of thousands of members of the Mehdi Army, the militia loyal to Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, marched through eastern Baghdad in an armed show of force.

The preferred US mechanism for engineering Maliki's removal is a provision in the Iraqi constitution requiring parliament to convene and begin formation of a new government by July, following the elections held April 30. Maliki's Shiite-based State of Law party won only 92 of the 325 seats. It is the largest single bloc, but would require support from Kurdish, Sunni or rival Shiite factions to establish a majority.

In 2010, after a similar splintered result in the parliamentary voting, Maliki simply ignored the constitutional requirement and held onto power until his rivals agreed to rubber-stamp a second term in office. This time around, both Washington and Maliki's political enemies at home are using the constitutional deadline to provide leverage for his removal.

The official statement issued by the US and Iraq after Monday's talks noted that Kerry "appreciated the Iraqi leaders' commitment to the political process and its constitutional required dates." Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the top Shiite cleric, seemed to give his backing to this maneuver, issuing an appeal read during Friday prayers calling on parliament to meet the constitutional deadline for forming a new government.

If the constitutional ploy fails, however, US support for

the removal of Maliki by extralegal methods is certainly possible. There is little doubt that one reason Kerry chose to stop over in Cairo on his way to Baghdad, bestowing US benediction on the bloodstained military ruler and new president, former general Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, was to send a message to Maliki.

Al-Sisi wields supreme power after the military ouster of elected president Mohamed Mursi, which the US State Department refused to designate as a coup. The same thing could take place in Iraq, if Maliki proves obdurate.

For the time being, however, the Iraqi military is incapable of defending its own bases, let alone overthrowing the government. A scathing report in the *Washington Post* Monday was headlined "Iraqi military facing 'psychological collapse' after losses, desertions." It cited US analysts suggesting that complete dissolution of the army was possible.

Meanwhile, a US senator blurted out the dirty secret of American policy in Iraq and Syria during appearances on two Sunday morning television talk shows. Speaking on both NBC's "Meet the Press" and CNN's "State of the Union," Kentucky Republican Rand Paul said that the crisis in Iraq was the result of the US arming of ISIS in the civil war in Syria against the Assad regime.

"I think we have to understand first how we got here," he said on CNN. "We have been arming ISIS in Syria." He continued, "We are where we are because we armed the Syrian rebels. We have been fighting alongside Al Qaeda, fighting alongside ISIS. ISIS is now emboldened and in two countries. But here's the anomaly. We're with ISIS in Syria. We're on the same side of the war. So, those who want to get involved to stop ISIS in Iraq are allied with ISIS in Syria. That is the real contradiction to this whole policy."

Paul went on to endorse the policy being pursued by Obama in Iraq now, in sending in special forces to prepare for air strikes, thus demonstrating the bipartisan support of every Democrat and every Republican in Washington for the new crimes being prepared by American imperialism.



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