

US escalates intervention in Mideast crisis

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The Obama administration has stepped up its military involvement in the civil war that has spread from Syria to Iraq, further fueling the slaughter and heightening the level of destruction and human suffering throughout the region.

On Thursday, the White House asked Congress to authorize \$500 million for direct US military training and equipment for Sunni insurgents fighting the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

On the same day, the Pentagon deployed drones over Baghdad to bolster the beleaguered government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki against Sunni insurgents led by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the first US military advisers began operations in the Iraqi capital.

The contradictions in US policy are stark. The CIA and US allies such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been arming and training Sunni Islamist fighters that are the backbone of the forces opposing the Assad government in Syria. The most extreme wing of the anti-Assad forces, ISIS, has now crossed the border into Iraq to wage war against the US-installed regime of Maliki, leading the US to step in to fight against a group that was tacitly allied with Washington in Syria.

The request for \$500 million in US military aid and training for the Syrian insurgents was part of a much larger \$65.8 billion request for Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), a supplement to the gargantuan \$700 billion Pentagon budget.

The bulk of the OCO will go to Afghanistan, where 36,000 US troops are engaged in extensive combat operations against Taliban forces in the southern and eastern districts of the country. Billions more will finance Special Forces and drone missile operations in Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere across North Africa.

Some \$5 billion of the OCO is dedicated to the “counterterrorism infrastructure” initiative Obama announced earlier this month, aimed at the region

extending from the Sahara Desert in Africa to Pakistan. Half of these funds will go to pay for US Special Forces and training of troops in partner nations across that vast region, while the remaining half will go to operations related to the Syrian civil war.

Of this, \$1.5 billion will flow to the four countries bordering on Syria—Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq—all US client states, to bolster border security and offset some of the costs of housing and feeding the millions of refugees who have fled the civil war.

Five hundred million dollars will go to training Syrian opposition forces to “defend the Syrian people, stabilize areas under opposition control, facilitate the provision of essential services, counter terrorist threats, and promote conditions for a negotiated settlement,” according to a White House summary.

The remaining \$500 million will pay for “unforeseen contingencies related to counterterrorism or regional instability”—in other words, Pentagon, CIA and State Department operations related to the crisis in Iraq.

The White House statement describes those Syrians who will receive training as “vetted elements” of the armed opposition. This formulation is meant to suggest that, unlike previous US efforts to foment civil war in Syria, this new initiative will exclude Al Qaeda-linked groups such as ISIS and the Al Nusra Front.

It has been widely reported that hundreds of ISIS members—likely including many of those now engaged in the offensive against Maliki in Iraq—received military training from CIA operatives at camps in Jordan.

Leading congressional Democrats have backed the escalation of US support for the Syrian insurgents, with Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, declaring his support “in light of recent events in Iraq and Syria.”

The US military began supplying some Syrian opposition groups with TOW anti-tank missiles last month, the first significant shipment of heavy weapons

directly from Pentagon inventories. Up to then, US weapons found their way to the insurgents via Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The flights by armed US drones over Baghdad marked another step towards a direct US military re-engagement in Iraq. Until Thursday, US drone flights were limited to unarmed reconnaissance vehicles. The armed drones operate from a US air base in neighboring Kuwait.

Also on Thursday, the Iraqi army launched its first major counteroffensive since the arrival of US Special Forces “advisers” and the opening of a US-run Joint Operations Center in Baghdad. Helicopter-borne commandos landed near the ISIS-held city of Tikrit, the hometown of Saddam Hussein and a stronghold of Sunni opposition to the Maliki government. There was heavy fighting around a university campus in the city.

Meanwhile, the diplomatic and political maneuvering over the crisis continued. Iraqi officials announced that the newly elected parliament would convene for the first time on Tuesday, July 1, beginning the process of the formation of a new government. US officials have been pushing for Prime Minister Maliki to step down and be replaced by another Shiite political figure not as hated by the Sunni and Kurdish minorities.

US Secretary of State John Kerry arrived Friday in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, where he met with King Abdullah, following talks in Paris with the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates—all Sunni-majority countries that are hostile to the Shiite-based Maliki government.

The Saudi monarch has put the Saudi armed forces on full alert because of the crisis in Iraq. ISIS fighters have seized border crossings between Iraq and Syria and between Iraq and Jordan, and are moving south toward the Iraq-Saudi border.



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