US boosts missile sales to Iraq

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1 August 2014

Amid attempts by the Iraqi army to push back the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its Sunni Arab allies, the Pentagon announced this week the go-ahead for a large increase in the sale of Hellfire missiles to Iraq. The deal is part of the Obama administration's desperate efforts to shore up the Baghdad regime and US economic and strategic interests in Iraq and throughout the Middle East.

The $700 million deal involves the provision of an additional 5,000 missiles, on top of 780 already delivered this year. The sale of these deadly weapons, which can be fired from helicopters and planes, accelerated markedly after ISIS militias captured the northern Iraqi city of Mosul in June and rapidly seized towns further south. Some 450 missiles were delivered in July.

The Iraqi military has been seeking to boost its firepower, particularly its ability to launch air strikes, in a bid to stem and reverse the ISIS advances. The first of its orders of F-16 fighters was delivered in June, but sales of Bell helicopters, training aircraft and other military equipment are still waiting approval. Baghdad also signed agreements with Russia for the provision of attack helicopters and fighter aircraft.

Washington has so far refused Iraqi requests for air support and ruled out the involvement of US troops in combat. The Obama administration, however, has steadily built up the presence of military advisers, Special Forces troops and other personnel as it undertakes a review of options in Iraq.

Last week, Pentagon spokesman Colonel Steve Warren reported that 825 US troops were on the ground in Iraq. Of those, 465 were involved in security at the US embassy and US-protected facilities at Baghdad airport and about 100 were engaged in the embassy's office of security cooperation. Another 160 were running joint operation centres in Baghdad and Irbil, in the Kurdish north of the country. About 90 advisers were gathering intelligence "for recommendations for a way ahead."

The US military has also increased the number of surveillance flights by drones and manned aircraft from one a month to 50 a day.

Pentagon press secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby, who announced the missile sale, rejected criticism that the Obama administration was "dithering" in formulating its Iraq strategy. US military advisers in Iraq completed their evaluation in early July, which Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel was still reviewing, Kirby explained. He added that the recommendations "have got to be sound, and have to be based on logic, and not done in a rush."

The immediate reason for the delay is the Obama administration's determination to prevent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki taking office for a third term after Iraq's April 30 election. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was directly responsible for inflaming sectarian divisions and violence. Washington exploited the classic means of colonial occupation—divide-and-rule—to stabilise its grip over the country.

The Bush and Obama administrations both backed the Maliki regime, which rests on sectarian Shiite-based parties, as the best means to secure US interests in Iraq. US military and intelligence agencies helped establish Shiite death squads that were used to crush anti-US Sunni insurgences and terrorise the Sunni population.

Washington is now blaming Maliki for alienating the Sunni population and Sunni tribal militias that support ISIS, and demanding a government of national unity in Baghdad as the political means for undermining Sunni extremists. The Obama administration has made clear that significant military assistance, including US air strikes, is contingent on Maliki's removal from office.

Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, declared last week: "If we can get a

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credible partner [in Iraq], then I think we can do any number of things ... [W]e can put advisers on the ground ... to provide intelligence, to provide planning expertise, to use close air support." However, he added, "whether we have credible, reliable partners in Iraq remains to be seen."

The Obama administration is engaged in behind-the-scene efforts in Iraq and the wider region to re-engineer the puppet regime it installed in Baghdad. With Iran engaged in talks over its nuclear program and looking for a rapprochement, the US is leaning on Tehran to use its ties to Shiite parties in Iraq to remove Maliki.

In the latest indication of fading support for Maliki, Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani appealed last Friday for "a spirit of national responsibility" and "self-sacrifice," urging all parties "not to cling to positions and posts."

Three months after the national election, no new government has been formed. Last week, the Iraqi parliament appointed Kurdish politician Fouad Massoum as president, following its installation of Sunni lawmaker Salim al-Jubouri as parliamentary speaker the week before. But the powerful post of prime minister remains undecided, amid intense jockeying and manoeuvring.

Even if Washington and its allies manage to lever Maliki from office, its policies are in shambles. Testifying before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations last week, Brookings Institution analyst Kenneth Pollack provided a bleak assessment of US options: "Given the American public's understandable unwillingness to re-commit the kind of resources we did in 2007-2008, we are unlikely to bring the Iraqi civil war to a speedy end with minimal bloodshed and still safeguard the range of American interests engaged there. For those reasons, the hard truth we face is that ... our options range from bad to awful."

This situation underlines the incoherence of American imperialist strategy, not only in Iraq, but throughout the Middle East. Having transformed Iraq into a sectarian quagmire, Washington instigated regime-change operations in Libya in 2011 and then Syria. The US and its allies—Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States—funded and armed Islamist militias in Syria to oust President Bashir al-Assad, spawning the ISIS militias now threatening the US-backed regime in Baghdad. At the same time, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are deeply hostile to the Shiite-dominated government in Iraq, which has become the arena for their regional rivalry with Iran.

While sections of the Obama administration advocate a government of national unity to try to prevent Iraq from disintegration, other officials advocate its carve-up along sectarian lines. Speaking before the House Committee on Foreign Relations last week, Brett McGurk, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq and Iran, suggested that a "functioning federalism" was needed, as "you're never going to fully control all of these territories, particularly given the capacity of ISIS."

In his Senate testimony, Pollack insisted that "doing nothing because all of the options are unpalatable would be the worst choice at all." On that, the US political establishment is agreed. The only means it has to shore up US hegemony in Iraq and throughout the region are those that it has employed over the past two decades—diplomatic bullying, intrigues and military force, all of which will only drive the entire region deeper into the morass of sectarian conflict.

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