

Obama authorises a new air war in Iraq

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In a statement signalling resumed US military operations in Iraq, President Obama announced yesterday evening in Washington that he had authorised American air strikes against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militia in northern Iraq.

The immediate pretext for the renewed military intervention is the plight of thousands of members of the Yazidi minority who have fled ISIS military advances and are reportedly trapped in mountainous areas of the Sinjar region in north-western Iraq. The Pentagon announced that the US military planes have already made air drops of food and water in the area.

In comments steeped in hypocrisy, Obama declared that the US could not “turn a blind eye” when the Iraqi religious minorities were threatened with a massacre. For the past month, the Obama administration has fully supported the Israeli slaughter of Palestinian civilians and levelling of large areas of the Gaza Strip.

Once again, US imperialism is playing the humanitarian card to justify its predatory aims. Obama’s phony professions of concern about the fate of Iraq’s Yazidi, Christian and other minorities are no more than a convenient excuse to put into action military plans drawn up over the past two months to combat ISIS militia.

The US has intervened in response to new ISIS offensives to the east and west of the northern city of Mosul, which its Islamist forces captured in June. Over the past week, ISIS and its Sunni militia allies have seized a major strategic dam and a series of towns that have brought them within striking distance of the Kurdish Autonomous Region and the regional capital of Erbil.

The collapse of resistance by the Kurdish peshmerga militias produced a degree of panic in Washington, as well as in Erbil and Baghdad. Washington has long relied on the Kurdish region as a base of operations inside Iraq. Following the fall of Mosul, Obama

ordered hundreds more US special forces and other military personnel into Iraq and established joint operation centres in Baghdad and Erbil. Obama invoked the protection of US diplomatic and military personnel in Erbil as a second justification for authorising air strikes.

Despite denials from the Pentagon, Kurdish and Iraqi officials reported that US air strikes have already begun in northern Iraq. Kurdish military spokesman Holgard Hekmat told Agence France Presse that US war planes hit two targets in northern Iraq. “F-16s first entered Iraqi airspace reconnaissance mission and are now targeting Daash (ISIS) in Gwer and the Sinjar region.” He claimed that US war planes struck a key bridge connecting Mosul to Gwer, which lies just 30 kilometres from the main checkpoint into the Kurdish region.

A *New York Times* article reported officials on Kurdish television as saying that US war planes hit ISIS targets in the towns of Gwer and Mahmour. It also cited a top Iraqi official, close to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who said the US consulted the Iraqi government late last night about launching air strikes, received the go-ahead and began bombing. In its denial, the Pentagon suggested that Turkish or Iraqi warplanes could have carried out the attacks.

In his statement, Obama indicated that the US was seeking support from its allies. France has already joined the propaganda campaign about the plight of the Yazidis and pushed for an emergency session of the UN Security Council, which condemned ISIS and called for international support for the Iraqi government. In a statement issued after speaking to Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, French President Francois Hollande declared that the persecution of religious minorities was “a very serious crime” and “confirmed France’s availability to bring support to the forces engaged in this combat.”

The propaganda campaign over Iraq's minorities recalls the hue and cry in the international media in 2011 over the alleged threat to the population of Benghazi. This served as the pretext for imposing a no-fly zone over Libya as part of the regime-change operation to oust Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Now the tattered banner of humanitarianism is again being raised in Iraq to justify military operations to shore up vital imperialist interests in the Kurdish Autonomous Region and Iraq more broadly.

ISIS itself is a product of the criminal operations of US imperialism in the Middle East over the past two decades. Faced with mounting resistance to its illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq, Washington deliberately inflamed sectarian Shiite-Sunni divisions. This played directly into the hands of Al Qaeda in Iraq, which transformed into ISIS. Its militia have been part of the US backed regime-change operation in neighbouring Syria, aimed at ousting President Bashar al-Assad, which is being funded and armed by US allies, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.

While condemning the depredations of ISIS inside Iraq, the US remains silent about ISIS's operations within Syria against the Assad regime. The Islamic extremists, who seek to establish a caliphate over the whole region, draw no such distinction. Their military offensives toward the Kurdish regions of Iraq coincide with an attempt that began last month to seize the largely Kurdish city of Ain al-Arab in Syria.

The Obama administration has, until now, held off providing military support to the Iraqi government against ISIS in a bid to force Maliki to abandon plans for a third term as prime minister. The US and allies such as Saudi Arabia regard Maliki as too closely aligned with Iran and have blamed him for alienating the country's Sunni population. Obama's authorisation of air strikes coincides not only with the ISIS threat to the Kurdish north, but with the deadline for anointing a replacement prime minister.

In launching a new air war in Iraq, Obama is acutely conscious of widespread anti-war sentiment in the US and internationally, generated in no small part by the brutal, US-led occupation of Iraq between 2003 and 2011. "I will not allow the United States to be dragged into fighting another war in Iraq," he declared last night. However, the determination of US imperialism to maintain a dominant position in Iraq and the Middle

East has a logic of its own—having despatched hundreds of US military advisers to Iraq and now unleashed US air power, the US is already enmeshed in an escalating conflict that not only involves Iraq and Syria but could draw in other regional powers.



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