No end date for US military intervention in Iraq

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The Obama administration's launch of open-ended air strikes against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an offshoot of Al Qaeda, will inexorably escalate, with calls already being made for the redeployment of up to 15,000 troops to Iraq.

At least four attacks were carried out by US aircraft and drones on Sunday, following a similar number over Friday and Saturday. The air strikes were directed against ISIS forces who are fighting Kurdish pesh merga militia in the Sinjar Mountains, a rugged range in the northwest of Iraq near the Syrian border.

ISIS has captured 17 towns and villages in the area in recent weeks, as well as the massive Mosul Dam on the Tigris River. The Islamist movement is threatening to advance on Erbil, the capital of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, which is just 30 kilometres from the front lines.

Kurdish troops have retreated in the face of the Islamist offensive and formed defensive lines protecting Erbil. The Kurdish withdrawal triggered a mass exodus of terrified civilians, with hundreds of thousands of Chaldean Christians and Yazidi Kurds, fearing brutal persecution by ISIS, fleeing to the Kurdish region. Some refugees fled into civil war-wracked Syria, seeking sanctuary in the Kurdish-populated districts.

As many as 40,000 Yazidis—an ethnic Kurdish religious minority—had no alternative but to flee into the mountains, where they have become trapped by the fighting. American and British aircraft have made some drops of relief supplies to the Yazidis, but, without food or water and exposed to blistering heat, hundreds of children and elderly are dying each day.

The plight of the Yazidis was used by Obama as one of the pretexts to order the first direct US military attacks in Iraq since the end of the US occupation in December 2011. The air strikes, however, have been planned for some weeks.

As many as 50 drone surveillance flights per day were being carried out over the areas of northern Iraq that ISIS captured in June. The main trigger for air strikes was not the conditions of Yazidi civilians, but the prospect of an ISIS assault on Erbil, where the US military has a command and control base. Panic gripped the city late last week, with foreign companies flying out their employees, residents leaving, and Kurdish troops rushing to construct massive earth berms across the roads into the city.

US air support enabled Kurdish forces to recapture several villages over the weekend. However, ISIS, which was provided massive quantities of weapons by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to fight the Syrian government in the US-backed civil war, still controls a large swathe of eastern Syria and northern and western Iraq.

Large numbers of Islamic extremists from around the world are fighting in its militias. In Iraq, thousands of Sunnis who are hostile to the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad have joined its military operations. Its supporters have also taken up arms in areas of Lebanon and Jordan along the borders with Syria.

Pro-ISIS graffiti and leaflets with anti-government slogans are now appearing in cities across Saudi Arabia, where the monarchy has tried for decades to channel social discontent into Islamic extremist operations in other countries.

A chorus of demands is now being made in US political and military circles for massive arms shipments to the Iraqi Kurdish region and for Kurdish pesh merga to be used as ground troops in a US-directed counteroffensive. Throughout the occupation,

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the US did not arm the Kurdish militia, but instead sought to develop a national Iraqi Army. When ISIS crossed from Syria and began its offensive in northern Iraq in June, entire divisions of the Iraqi army abandoned their positions and their equipment, allowing the Islamists to capture hundreds of armoured Humvees and trucks, mobile artillery and tanks, and large stockpiles of modern infantry weapons and ammunition. For the past eight weeks, the Iraqi Army has failed to retake any significant territory.

Kurdish commanders have blamed their defeat over recent weeks on the superior firepower in the hands of ISIS, while declaring they can defeat the Islamists if they are supplied with armour and heavy weapons and backed by US air support. Speaking yesterday, former Republican presidential candidate Senator John McCain stated: “I would be rushing equipment to Erbil. I would be launching air strikes not only in Iraq, but in Syria… against ISIS. I would be providing as much aid and equipment as I can to the Kurds.”

Fox News commentator Charles Krauthammer declared on Friday: “The only thing that will make a difference is boots on the ground. Kurdish boots! Nobody’s asking for Americans. Just fly in the weapons!”

The logic of using Kurdish forces as the ground component of a US-directed operation, however, was spelt out in comments to the *Military Times* by retired Army Colonel Peter Mansoor, who was an executive officer in 2007 for General David Petraeus, then the US commander in Iraq.

Mansoor said that the US military would require an operating base to sustain the type of open-ended air war in Iraq that Obama announced late Thursday night. “You’re talking about a 10,000- to 15,000-soldier effort, to include maintenance and medevac and security,” he stated. “But that is the price you’re going to pay if you want to roll back [ISIS]. You can’t just snap your fingers and make it go away.”

While the White House is continuing to insist that US intervention will be limited to air strikes, Secretary of State John Kerry stated on Friday: “The president has taken no option off the table, and there are current discussions taking place.”

Behind-the-scenes intrigues are also underway to refashion the Iraqi government in Baghdad through the ousting of Maliki as prime minister and installation of someone who can be presented as the figurehead proponent of “national unity.” Shiite powerbrokers such as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Moqtada al-Sadr are reportedly negotiating with Maliki’s party over his replacement.

Among the most likely candidates is Hussain al-Shahristani, the current deputy prime minister and foreign minister. Shahristani was a nationally renowned nuclear scientist, who was imprisoned from 1979 to 1991 by the regime of Saddam Hussein for refusing to assist its nuclear program. After escaping from the country during the first Gulf War, he played a thoroughly despicable role in 2003 in promoting the lies that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction—the false pretext for the 2003 US invasion.

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