

US combat troops return to Iraq

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Some 130 US Special Forces soldiers landed on Mt. Sinjar in northern Iraq Wednesday, as part of the preparation for what Pentagon officials described as a larger mission to supposedly rescue Yazidi refugees fleeing the advance of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamist group that now controls much of eastern Syria and western Iraq.

In announcing the operation to an audience of Marines at Camp Pendleton, California, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel declared, “This is not a combat boots on the ground kind of operation.” However, he went on qualify this statement so heavily as to transform its meaning to the opposite.

“We’re not going back into Iraq in any of the same combat mission dimensions that we once were in Iraq,” he added, a statement that would be true of any troop deployment short of the full-scale invasion by 160,000 troops undertaken by President George W. Bush in 2003.

In comments Wednesday afternoon, a top White House official, deputy National Security Council director Ben Rhodes, reduced Obama’s pledge to send combat troops to Iraq to a verbal quibble. He claimed that the deployment of ground troops for the purposes of rescuing the Yazidis was “different than reintroducing US forces in a combat role to take the fight” against ISIS.

“There are dangers involved in any military operation,” Rhodes continued, but added that Obama was “confident that we can have a limited military objective.”

Press accounts made little effort to distinguish between the reconnaissance mission carried by the 130 soldiers from US Special Forces and actual combat. US soldiers deployed on Mt. Sinjar may well be fired on by ISIS fighters, and would be expected to return fire. A larger force, sent in for the nominal purpose of rescuing trapped Yazidis, would be even more likely to engage in firefights with ISIS.

At least one helicopter bringing supplies of food and water to Mt. Sinjar has crashed, killing the pilot and injuring several passengers, including a *New York Times* reporter. The cause of the crash—either weather conditions

or hostile fire—was not clear.

The 130 Special Forces troops brings the total deployment of US soldiers in Iraq ordered by Obama over the past month to just over 1,000. This includes 160 at operations centers in Baghdad and the Kurdish capital Irbil, another 90 military advisers in Baghdad, and a sizeable reinforcement of the Marine unit guarding the US embassy in Baghdad’s “Green Zone.”

US warplanes and drones have attacked ISIS positions near Mt. Sinjar and south of Irbil for six consecutive days, targeting artillery positions and convoys of armored vehicles. In effect, the US military is destroying part of the stockpile it left behind in the hands of the Iraqi army, which was captured by ISIS in June with the fall of Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city.

The real purpose of the US intervention is neither the “humanitarian” pretext enunciated by Obama last week, or the need to safeguard US government personnel in Baghdad and Irbil (who could, of course, be evacuated). It is to reestablish the dominant position of US imperialism in the region which is threatened by the near-collapse of the US-trained Iraqi military in the face of the ISIS offensive.

For that reason, Obama received a hearty endorsement of his actions by one of the most notorious and discredited warmongers in US politics, former Democratic senator and vice-presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman. In a column published Wednesday in the *Washington Post*, Lieberman praised Obama’s decision to intervene, and particularly his declaration that the new operations in Iraq will not be time-limited. He concluded: “In other words, even after we successfully provide protection and relief to threatened Yazidis, Christians and Americans, a longer-term fight must be waged.”

The US military effort in Iraq is backed by at least two European imperialist powers. British Prime Minister David Cameron has sent Chinook helicopters to help in the supply operations on Mt. Sinjar, as well as reconnaissance planes to assist in aerial surveillance. British military cargo planes are transporting aid to the

Yazidis and Kurds made available by other European countries.

More politically significant is the intervention by France, which under the presidency of conservative Jacques Chirac opposed the 2003 US decision to invade and occupy Iraq. The current president, Francois Hollande of the Socialist Party, announced Tuesday that his government would send arms to the Kurdish peshmerga troops fighting ISIS in northern Iraq.

“In order to respond to the urgent needs expressed by the Kurdistan regional authorities, the president has decided, in agreement with Baghdad, to deliver arms in the coming hours,” said a statement from his office. “France intends to play an active role by providing, along with its partners and in liaison with the new Iraqi authorities, all the assistance required.”

French imperialism has pursued a far more aggressive foreign policy over the past four years, with then-president Nicolas Sarkozy sending troops into Ivory Coast in 2011, then leading the campaign for the US-NATO war against Libya. Since taking office in 2012, Hollande has escalated still further, with French intervention in Mali and the Central African Republic, both former French colonies, and now reversing course on Iraq.

France has considerable commercial interests in the Kurdish region, mainly in the oil industry, where the French firm Total announced discovery last October of new oil and gas fields about 60 miles from Irbil. (See: “France backs renewed US war in Iraq”).

While stepping up its military intervention, the Obama administration has also pushed ahead with a settling of accounts in Baghdad with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who has been designated to take the fall for the debacle facing the puppet regime established by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Under intense US pressure, the newly elected president Fouad Musam named a Shiite politician from Maliki’s own Dawa Party to replace Maliki as Prime Minister. Haider al-Abadi was elected last month as a deputy prime minister, making him the highest-ranking Shiite officeholder under Maliki. He will now have 30 days to form a new cabinet.

After initially mobilizing military forces on the streets of Baghdad and encouraging demonstrations by political supporters, Maliki backed off Wednesday. He conceded that the struggle over the position of prime minister would be settled through the courts, which have already ruled against him on several constitutional challenges, and not by force of arms.

Maliki’s televised speech Wednesday was defiant in tone, denouncing President Massoum for carrying out “a coup against the constitution and the political process,” and even claiming that his own removal would do more damage to the country than the Sunni uprising led by ISIS.

But the now lame-duck prime minister has told military units not to intervene, after he received direct threats from Washington that all US aid would be cut off in the event of a pro-Maliki coup.

Secretary of State John Kerry made the starker warning, declaring, “There should be no use of force, no introduction of troops or militias into this moment of democracy for Iraq.” He added, “There will be little international support of any kind whatsoever for anything that deviates from the legitimate constitutional process that is in place and being worked on now.”

The cynicism here is breathtaking. The US government routinely ignores the “legitimate constitutional process” of any country where it wants to oust an uncooperative government—see Ukraine, Syria, Honduras and Thailand, just in the recent period—or seeks a rapprochement with an important ally, like the Egyptian military, which rules by the bloodiest methods.

The apparent coup de grace for Maliki came Tuesday, with the declaration by Iran, his principal ally, that it was satisfied with the choice of al-Abadi as a replacement. Several powerful pro-Iranian militias in Baghdad, including Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Badr Brigade, have already declared their support for al-Abadi.

Maliki is now reportedly discussing the terms of his own removal, including possible positions in a government headed by al-Abadi, as well as guarantees against prosecution and for his physical safety.



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