

Dropping initial pretext, Obama vows to continue Iraq intervention

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The Obama administration Thursday backed off from a “humanitarian” intervention that had already seen the deployment of some 130 US Special Operations troops, claiming that a supposedly desperate crisis threatening tens of thousands of Yazidi refugees with imminent death no longer existed.

In a televised statement Thursday afternoon, President Obama attributed the nonexistence of the previously publicized catastrophe to the success of the US military operation against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which consisted of several sets of air strikes, along with the actions of Kurdish militia forces.

Obama stressed that the air strikes would continue, even in the absence of the previously trumpeted humanitarian catastrophe. The US military, he said “will continue air strikes to protect our people and facilities in Iraq.” He added that Washington would act militarily “wherever we have capabilities and we can carry out effective missions,” but said this would be done “without committing combat troops on the ground.”

This last pledge is revealing, in that it dispenses with the more general promise not to put “boots” on the ground, substituting the words “combat troops.” This is a substantially more narrow term. It was used during the US occupation of Iraq to exclude special operations forces, advisors and trainers, some 10,000 or more of whom the administration had wanted to leave behind after the formal end of the nearly nine-year US war in Iraq. Washington was unable to keep this residual force in place because of the Iraqi government’s refusal to sign a status of forces agreement providing US troops with immunity from prosecution for any crimes committed against the country’s population.

Now these forces are being sent back in, with the Pentagon having secured the guarantees that the Iraqi

regime had previously denied.

A week ago, Obama used a speech to justify US air strikes in Iraq with the claim that “tens of thousands” of members of Iraq’s Yazidi religious minority were faced with a choice of descending from the mountain to be slaughtered by ISIS or staying to die of hunger and thirst.

It is now clear that either the desperate plight faced by those fleeing the advance of the Islamist militia had been grossly exaggerated in terms of its scale, or Washington has cynically decided to dispense with those it previously claimed it would rescue. In either case, it is evident that the US government is once again going to war based on lies, and that humanitarian concerns were merely a pretext for intervention.

The first indication that the crisis was nowhere near the scope that had been claimed came from the Pentagon, whose spokesman, Rear Adm. John Kirby, said that US troops who had reached Sinjar placed the number of Yazidis on the mountain “in the neighborhood of 4,000,” out of which roughly half were local residents who had no intention of leaving. Kirby added that the “humanitarian” airdrops carried out by US warplanes on Mt. Sinjar were being brought to a halt after the US team reported finding that many of the pallets of food and water previously dropped had been left unopened.

Both representatives of the Yazidis within Iraq and United Nations officials, however, disputed the US claims. Vian Dakhil, the only Yazidi member of Iraq’s parliament, who was injured in a helicopter crash on Mt. Sinjar Tuesday, told the *New York Times* that as many 70,000 to 80,000 people remained trapped on the southern slopes of the mountain without aid and under terrible conditions.

As for the impact of the US air strikes in “breaking

the siege” of Mt. Sinjar and protecting Irbil, the capital of Iraq’s Kurdish region, reports from Iraq indicate that a more significant role was played by the entry into the fight against ISIS of Kurdish guerrillas from Turkey, members of the Kurdish Workers Party, or PKK, which is branded by Washington as a “foreign terrorist organization.”

In a report on this little publicized aspect of the fighting in Iraq, the McClatchy news agency noted, “The entry of PKK forces into the fighting in northern Iraq, particularly so close to Irbil, which the Obama administration has declared particularly sensitive because of the large American consulate and the joint operations center based there, could prove somewhat embarrassing.”

The US provision of close air support for a Kurdish group that is officially designated as “terrorist” is only one of many glaring contradictions, as elements within the US ruling establishment promote the other well-worn pretext for US military intervention in Iraq: the “global war on terrorism.”

This theme was made the center of a *Washington Post* front-page article Thursday entitled “Militant threat gets modest response.” The article states that ISIS “has attracted more fighters, controls more territory and has access to a larger stream of money than Al Qaeda did before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.” It chides the Obama administration for having “mounted a decidedly modest military campaign to check its advance through northern Iraq,” one that “has been defined primarily by the limits it has placed on the US military’s intervention.”

The *Post* goes on to quote Adm. James Stavridis, a former supreme allied commander of NATO, as warning that air strikes are not sufficient and arguing for “a fast and serious response, including Special Operations forces on the ground.” Also cited is retired Col. Derek Harvey, a former senior officer in Iraq and at US Central Command, who insists that “probably close to 8,000” US ground troops will be needed to drive ISIS out of the large swathe of Iraqi territory it has taken.

Unmentioned in the article are the central political considerations and contradictions that the US administration confronts as it resumes its direct intervention in Iraq. These include the fact that ISIS has managed to wrest one quarter or more of Iraq’s

territory from Baghdad because of a far broader revolt by the county’s Sunni minority population against a Shia-dominated government that has carried out sectarian policies of repression and discrimination.

Also complicating the US response to the ISIS advance in Iraq is the fact that the same Islamist group comprises the main fighting force in the US-backed war for regime change against the government of President Bashar al-Assad across the border in Syria.

That Washington’s supposed “humanitarian” impulses come into play only when they further US imperialism’s predatory objectives has been underscored by reports that the Iraqi military, to which the Pentagon is rushing arms and ammunition, has at least since May—before the ISIS offensive—been dropping barrel bombs on residential neighborhoods of the insurgent Sunni-dominated cities of Anbar province.

The Al-Monitor web site reported that the use of the weapon, together with the participation of Shi’ite militias in the fighting, has “exacerbated the rage, as the government is now accused of waging a war to exterminate Sunnis in Iraq.”

While the US administration has continuously denounced the Assad regime for the use of barrel bombs against areas held by the US-backed “rebels” in Syria, it has no problem when the same weapon is employed by the Iraqi regime just across the border.

Washington successfully imposed its dictate of regime change in Iraq Thursday, with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki announcing his resignation in favor of the US-backed prime minister-designate, Haider al-Abadi, a member of Maliki’s own Shi’ite Da’wa party. It is far from clear, however, that this reshuffling at the top of the regime will ameliorate the country’s deep crisis, the end product of the mass killing and destruction inflicted over the course of nearly nine years of US war and occupation.



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