

US expands air war in Iraq

Peter Symonds
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The Obama administration has dropped the humanitarian pretence as it expands the US air war in Iraq against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias. Initially justified as necessary to protect threatened Iraqi minorities and American personnel in Iraq, the air strikes over the weekend were in support of a military offensive by Iraqi and Kurdish forces to recapture the Mosul dam.

According to the latest reports, Kurdish militias or peshmerga had seized key areas surrounding the strategic dam, a massive structure across the Tigris River that provides power and water for much of northern Iraq. ISIS fighters overran the dam in early August as part of an offensive to seize areas under the Kurdish control, ending what had been a standoff with Kurdish forces since ISIS captured the northern city of Mosul in June.

US Central Command reported that land-based bombers as well as fighters and unmanned drones carried out 14 strikes on Sunday—the most in a single day since President Obama authorised a renewed air war in Iraq on August 7. These followed nine air strikes on Saturday around the dam and near the city of Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish Autonomous Region.

Obama authorised the use of air strikes amid a media campaign highlighting the plight of thousands of members of Iraq's Yazidi minority trapped by ISIS on Mount Sinjar. Conflicting reports continue to emerge about the fate of the Yazidis, including of ISIS massacres in towns it has seized. However, having exploited the threat to the minority to justify military action, Washington is now dispensing with the humanitarian pretext and launching air strikes as part of a coordinated military campaign to prop up its puppet government in Baghdad.

A Pentagon statement yesterday declared that US forces were now operating to “protect critical infrastructure” as well as “support Iraqi security forces

and Kurdish defence forces who are working together to combat” ISIS fighters. Obama is expanding the US military intervention in Iraq without even the formality of hearings on Capitol Hill, let alone Congressional authorisation. He simply informed Congress that he had authorised the latest air strikes.

American military involvement in Iraq is set to expand even further after Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki stepped aside last Thursday following a concerted campaign by Washington and its allies to force him out. The US has hypocritically criticised Maliki for deepening the sectarian Shiite-Sunni divide that it deliberately stirred up in the wake of the 2003 invasion to consolidate its occupation.

Maliki's replacement, Haider al-Abadi, has been backed by Washington and tasked to form a government that would include Sunni leaders in order to undercut support among the Sunni population for ISIS. On Friday, Taha Mohammed al-Hamdoon, a spokesman for Sunni tribal and clerical leaders, called for an end to “indiscriminate bombing.”

American officials told the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) Friday that Abadi had to draft a “national unity strategy” for Washington and its European allies to rally behind. “We are ready to consider all options” once the plan is in place, a senior US official told the newspaper. “All options” undoubtedly include an intensified air war in support of the Iraqi military, supplies of weapons and ammunition, and an expanded US ground presence. While Obama has ruled out sending combat troops, the US already has over 900 Special Forces, military advisers and other personnel in Iraq.

The WSJ reported: “Military officials have drawn up plans for an expanded air campaign that could hit Islamic State [ISIS] forces in Sunni strongholds such as Anbar province.” While the US military had no authorisation at present for such air strikes, the

Pentagon had “considerable leeway to increase air strikes” including around Baghdad under the pretext of protecting American personnel in the capital.

The Obama administration undoubtedly wants to establish a more pliable regime under Abadi in Baghdad that would open the way for a permanent US military presence in Iraq. Obama withdrew American troops from Iraq in 2011, after the Maliki government refused to agree to a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that would have granted legal immunity for the continued presence of around 10,000 US military personnel.

Washington is hoping that a “national unity strategy” under Abadi would enable a rerun of the tactics to isolate Al Qaeda in Iraq—the precursor to ISIS—before its withdrawal of troops. The US financed, armed and trained Sunni tribal militias to assist in driving the Al Qaeda fighters out of areas like Anbar Province. Al Qaeda in Iraq, however, joined the US-backed regime change operation in neighbouring Syria, and spawned ISIS, which is now pursuing its reactionary plan for an Islamic Caliphate in both countries.

Washington’s Middle East policy is fraught with contradictions. US efforts to establish a national unity government in Iraq are also threatened by sharp tensions between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which used the ISIS offensive in June to seize the city of Kirkuk and its surrounding oil fields. The KRG has been demanding the right to independently sell oil, which has been bitterly opposed by Baghdad.

The US and its European allies have all indicated their willingness to arm the Kurdish peshmerga who are on the frontline of the war against ISIS militia, but the Baghdad government insists that it must approve such supplies. The Iraqi army command issued a statement on Sunday warning “all parties not to exploit the current security situation in the north of Iraq and violate sovereign airspace to ship arms to local parties without approval of the central government.” Baghdad fears that a more heavily-armed peshmerga will only strengthen moves towards a separate Kurdish state.

At the same time, there are growing reports that fighters from the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a Kurdish separatist organisation in Turkey, have joined Iraqi peshmerga militias in the offensive against ISIS. The PKK has been engaged in a protracted conflict

with the Turkish military and is branded by the US State Department as a “terrorist organisation.” PKK fighters are not only part of the US-backed peshmerga offensive, but, analyst Shwan Zulal told France24 that “the PKK and US Marines near the Sinjar area apparently had some interaction assessing the situation.” Such collaboration is likely to draw sharp protests from Turkey, a NATO ally.

Having destabilised Iraq through its 2003 invasion, the Obama administration is recklessly intervening in another bid to stamp its hegemony over the country. Far from bringing peace and stability to Iraq, the US military intervention threatens to further fuel sectarian and ethnic conflicts not only in Iraq but in the broader region.



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