

More US troops and air strikes in Iraq

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Less than two weeks after President Obama authorised air strikes in Iraq, the Pentagon is continuing to expand its air operations and preparing to dispatch hundreds more American troops to the country.

The initial pretexts for the renewed US military intervention in Iraq—protecting the country’s Yazidi minority, as well as American personnel—have been quickly pushed to one side. Having assisted Iraqi and Kurdish forces this week to seize the Mosul Dam from Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias, Washington is weighing up the further use of US air power to support the Iraqi military.

There has been no letup in the US air war following the release of a ghastly video of the murder of American journalist James Foley. US Central Command reported that US drones and aircraft conducted 14 more strikes yesterday on targets close to the Mosul Dam, including on ISIS roadblocks and vehicles. The number of attacks since Obama’s authorisation on August 8 now totals 84.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported yesterday that “military planners are considering new airstrikes to prevent militants with the Islamic State from taking control of another strategic site, the Haditha Dam, which lies in Iraq’s Sunni stronghold of Anbar Province.”

Unlike the Mosul Dam, the Haditha Dam is already under the control of Iraqi government troops. It is nowhere near American personnel stationed in Baghdad or in the northern Kurdish Autonomous Region. The dam provides a convenient pretext for air strikes that would allow the Iraqi military to open up a new front against ISIS in Sunni heartland in Iraq’s west.

ISIS seized Fallujah in January and declared the western city to be its Iraqi capital. In June, its forces captured the northern city of Mosul and moved south to take Tikrit and menace the capital Baghdad. Several Iraqi army offensives to retake Tikrit have failed,

including the latest this week, which bogged down on roads leading to the city.

US officials told the *Wall Street Journal* that “the short air campaign that helped Kurdish forces retake the Mosul Dam on Monday could become the model the US uses in the weeks ahead: massive air power with no US forces on the ground in harm’s way.”

No US troops “in harm’s way” does not preclude a further expansion of the number of American military personnel in Iraq, including advisers, special forces troops and intelligence operatives. A US official who spoke to *Stars and Stripes* said the Pentagon was weighing up a request from the State Department to station another 300 troops in Iraq.

The US already has about 850 troops in Iraq, including around 100 as part of the Office of Security Cooperation. Of the remainder, about half are protecting the American embassy in Iraq, and Baghdad International Airport. The rest are involved in joint operations centres with the Iraqi military in Baghdad and Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish Autonomous Region, as well as unspecified intelligence and assessment activities.

The *International Business Times* reported on Monday that an elite unit of about 100 CIA agents and US special forces had been formed to hunt down and kill ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Given the rapidly expanding scope of the US military intervention in Iraq, the dispatch of further combat troops is not excluded.

US officials have been drawing up military plans since the ISIS seizure of Mosul, but the White House held off as a means of forcing the departure of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Now that Maliki has been replaced by Haider al-Abadi, the Obama administration is putting its plans into operation. At the same time, it is pressing Abadi, from the Shiite Islamist Dawa Party, to form a more “inclusive” government

with Sunni and Kurdish politicians.

Washington's overriding concern is to establish a pliable client regime in Baghdad that is more amenable to US strategic and economic interests in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole. While blaming Maliki for fostering sectarian and ethnic divisions, the US deliberately fomented such antagonisms after 2003 as a means of shoring up its occupation of Iraq. Having fuelled tensions that could fragment the country, Washington is appealing for a "national unity" government as the best vehicle for its ambitions in Iraq.

USA Today yesterday reported that "US and Iraqi officials [have] pressed tribal sheiks and other Sunni leaders to turn on the Islamic State militants, who have taken over towns and cities." These tactics are a re-run of the "Sunni Awakening" in 2006–07, when the US paid Sunni tribal militias to fight Al Qaeda in Iraq, the precursor to ISIS.

While President Obama pulled out US troops from Iraq in 2011, the US embassy in Baghdad, built at a cost of \$750 million, remained one of the largest in the world. Following the ISIS advances in June, some embassy staff in Baghdad were relocated to Erbil and Basra, in southern Iraq, as well as the Iraq Support Unit in Amman. The US has about 5,500 staff at the embassy and its two Iraqi consulates, down from 16,000 in 2009.

American diplomats and CIA operatives are undoubtedly active in the political manoeuvring and intrigues to form the next government.

Kurdish politician Hoshiyar Zebari has returned to his position of Iraqi foreign minister after suspending his involvement in the government during July as a protest over Maliki's accusation that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was harbouring Sunni "terrorists."

Zebari's return is tentative, however. Kurdish and Sunni politicians have a long list of demands, including the amendment or abolition of some 300 to 400 laws passed by the Maliki government. At the top of the list of Kurdish demands is the KRG's right to export oil from areas under its control, independently of the Baghdad government.

The continuing tensions between the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad and the KRG were on display after the recapture of the Mosul Dam. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on Tuesday that scuffles broke out between Iraqi army units and Kurdish

peshmerga militias as journalists were being given a victory tour of the site. Both sides claimed responsibility for driving out ISIS—a signal of wider disputes over territory in northern Iraq if ISIS is defeated.



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