US steps up Mideast military intervention

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US warplanes carried out air strikes against forces of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Saturday night and Sunday morning, supporting an offensive by pro-government forces that broke the two-month siege of the town of Amerli by the Sunni Islamist group.

Amerli is populated by the Turkmen minority, who account for about 3 percent of Iraq's people and are predominantly Shi'ite. They speak a non-Arabic language linked closely to Turkish, and were frequently the pretext for Turkish government intervention into Iraqi affairs.

The town, 105 miles north of Baghdad in the province of Salahuddin, has been under siege by ISIS since the group launched its offensive in early June, overrunning Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, and much of the three majority-Sunni provinces north of Baghdad—Nineveh, Salahuddin and Dyala. All three provinces have large non-Sunni or non-Arab minorities: a complex mixture of Shi'ite Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen of both Islamic sects, as well as Christians and Yazidis.

The operation around Amerli is the latest expansion of the intervention in Iraq ordered by President Obama in early August. Obama justified the initial US airstrikes by reference to the plight of tens of thousands of Yazidis supposedly trapped on Mt. Sinjar, as well as the need to defend US installations in Baghdad and the Kurdish capital Irbil.

Subsequently, the US provided massive air support to a joint counteroffensive by Kurdish peshmerga fighters and Iraqi Army troops to retake control of the giant Mosul Dam, Iraq's largest hydroelectric facility.

Amerli marks the first use of American warplanes in support of a ground attack by Shi'ite militiamen who were mobilized after the fall of Mosul and the disintegration of much of the Iraqi Army in the face of ISIS forces. The Shi'ite militia engaged in a coordinated attack with Kurdish peshmerga and regular Iraqi Army troops to drive ISIS fighters back from the town.

According to a report posted on the *New York Times* web site Sunday night, "the United States has provided air support for several Iranian-backed Shiite militias that are leading the fight against ISIS in Amerli with the help of Kurdish peshmerga forces and Iraqi Army units."

The *Times* identified the militias, as "Asaib Ahl al-Haq, perhaps the most experienced group, as well as Badr Corps, which is led by Hadi al-Ameri, the transportation minister, and a militia linked to the Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr, who was one of the United States' most implacable foes during the long American occupation. All those groups are supported by Iran."

The Qatar-based Al Jazeera cited unconfirmed reports by residents of Amerli that Iranian jets had also conducted air strikes on ISIS targets around the town. If true, this would put the United States and Iran on the same side of a battle for the first time since the 1979 Iranian revolution.

Pentagon spokesmen said that US airstrikes around Amerli had destroyed at least one ISIS checkpoint and five military vehicles, four of them likely supplied by the US to the Iraqi Army and seized by ISIS in the capture of Mosul.

US aircraft also dropped supplies to the population of Amerli, including field rations and water, along with aircraft from France, Australia and Britain, which have joined the renewed US intervention in Iraq.

As in the case of Mt. Sinjar, the alleged humanitarian crisis in Amerli proved to be greatly exaggerated once the siege was broken. On Mt. Sinjar, the 50,000 Yazidis claimed by Washington turned out to be 2,000, many of whom lived on the mountain and did not want to leave their livestock. In Amerli, while 17,000 Shi'ite Turkmen once lived there, only a few thousand, mainly men who had stayed on to fight ISIS, were actually to

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be found there on Sunday.

The US military also conducted more airstrikes against ISIS targets near the city of Mosul Saturday, destroying at least one outpost and an armed vehicle. “The strikes were conducted under the authority to support the Iraqi security force and Kurdish defense force operations, as well as to protect critical infrastructure, US personnel and facilities, and support humanitarian efforts, U.S. Central Command said in a press release.

US warplanes have carried out 120 strikes across northern Iraq this month. The Pentagon released a statement Friday that its operations against ISIS have cost an average of $7.5 million a day since they began in mid-June, which would bring the total to more than $500 million. This includes the cost of reconnaissance flights as well as airstrikes, and the maintenance of nearly 1,000 US soldiers deployed to Iraq over the past three months.

While the US escalated attacks on ISIS in Iraq, there was mounting pressure on the Obama administration to extend the war into Syria as well. Congressional Democrats as well as Republicans criticized Obama’s remark during a Thursday press conference that the administration had not yet developed a strategy for dealing with ISIS in Syria.

Two of the leading warmongers in the US Senate, Republicans John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, denounced Obama’s remarks in an op-ed column published Saturday in the *New York Times*. They argued, “[U]ltimately, ISIS is a military force, and it must be confronted militarily. Mr. Obama has begun to take military actions against ISIS in Iraq, but they have been tactical and reactive half-measures. Continuing to confront ISIS in Iraq, but not in Syria, would be fighting with one hand tied behind our back. We need a military plan to defeat ISIS, wherever it is …”

“No one is advocating unilateral invasion, occupation or nation-building,” they continued. “This should be more like Afghanistan in 2001, where limited numbers of advisers helped local forces, with airstrikes and military aid, to rout an extremist army.” The two senators passed over the subsequent development of the “limited” war in Afghanistan, which was the deployment of more than 100,000 troops in a war that is approaching the end of its 13th year.

The Democratic chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Diane Feinstein, appeared on NBC’s “Meet the Press” as its principal guest Sunday. She pronounced herself in complete agreement with the McCain-Graham op-ed attacking Obama, and said that he had been “too cautious” in dealing with ISIS. She echoed the call for preparing military intervention in Syria.

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