

US forms ten-nation coalition to escalate war in Iraq, Syria

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US officials announced Friday that a “core coalition” of ten countries, nine NATO members plus Australia, had agreed on a joint program of action against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the fundamentalist group whose forces now control much of eastern Syria and western and northern Iraq.

US Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel met on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Wales with their counterparts from Australia, Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Turkey.

According to Reuters, Kerry explained the program for fighting ISIS as follows: “We need to attack them in ways that prevent them from taking over territory, to bolster the Iraqi security forces and others in the region who are prepared to take them on, without committing troops of our own.”

Kerry later reiterated the last point, saying, “Obviously, I think that's a red line for everybody here: no boots on the ground.”

This assertion is for domestic consumption in all the countries that have agreed to join the US-led intervention in Iraq and very likely Syria. In each of these countries, including the United States, there is overwhelming public opposition to resuming the 2003-2011 war in Iraq.

The “no boots on the ground” formulation is aimed at appeasing popular antiwar sentiment while allowing the imperialist powers to do as they please. There are already 1,100 US troops in Iraq, and there are soon likely to be Special Forces troops and Air Force pilots from Britain, France and Australia as well.

The United States is already engaged in large-scale military action against ISIS, conducting nearly 150 bombing raids since President Obama first ordered the attacks in early August. The US, Britain, Canada,

France, Italy and Australia have begun supplying weapons to the Peshmerga, the militia of the Kurdish regional government in northern Iraq, as well as to the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad.

Other countries are expected to furnish “humanitarian” aid to the hundreds of thousands already displaced by the fighting across half of Iraq, as well as some supplies to the Iraqi or Kurdish armed forces.

At a press conference Friday in Cardiff, Wales, following the NATO summit, Obama said, “Key NATO allies stand ready to confront this terrorist threat through military, intelligence and law enforcement as well as diplomatic efforts.”

He claimed the joint efforts of the US and several allies had already stopped the advance of ISIS forces and “equipped our Iraqi partners and helped them go on offense.” Obama was referring to several tactical successes in the past two weeks by Kurdish and Iraqi troops and Iraqi Shiite militias backed by US air strikes.

ISIS remains, however, in control of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, as well as large swathes of Anbar, Salahuddin, Nineveh and Dyala provinces. ISIS forces are within striking distance both of Baghdad and the Kurdish capital Irbil, and they have continued to advance in Syria towards the key economic center of Aleppo.

In his remarks Friday, Obama sought to answer critics who have seized on his comments at a previous press conference, where he said the administration “did not have a strategy” for fighting ISIS in Syria. On Friday, he compared the campaign against ISIS to the US intervention in Afghanistan: beginning with air strikes, then limiting the area controlled by the insurgents, targeting their leaders with drone missiles

and other weapons, and finally “degrading and defeating” them.

None of the reporters raised the obvious question: given that the Afghanistan intervention led to the massive buildup of US and NATO forces, comprising as many as 160,000 soldiers at the peak, wasn’t such a course of action to be expected in the campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria?

Obama bolstered his reference to targeting leaders of ISIS with public gloating over the success of US air strikes September 1 against Al Shabab, the Islamist group that controls much of Somalia. He cited the Pentagon’s announcement Friday morning that the top leader of Al Shabab, Ahmed Adi Godane, was killed in Monday’s attack, implying that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi could expect the same fate.

This led one media commentator, CNN war hawk Wolf Blitzer, to boast that the US had been successful in “beheading” Al Shabab—a particularly crude remark in the wake of the media campaign over the brutal ISIS decapitation of two captured US journalists.

NBC News reported Thursday, citing a “senior security official,” that three leaders of ISIS were, in fact, killed in a US air strike in Mosul. These reportedly included Abu Hajar Al-Sufi, a top aide to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The Iraqi Defense Ministry issued a statement confirming the kill.

Washington will follow up the work at the NATO summit with intensive efforts to mobilize support for the campaign against ISIS among the Mideast regimes, some of which, like the US itself, have longstanding ties to the Islamic fundamentalist group, backing it in its attacks on the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Kerry will visit the Persian Gulf for talks with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, with a stopover in Jordan as well. Hagel will visit Turkey, following up on the private meeting between Obama and Turkish President-Elect Erdogan at the NATO summit. These discussions will likely focus heavily on the situation in Syria, since Jordan and Turkey have been the main routes for arms supplies to the “rebels,” including ISIS, fighting the Assad regime, and the location for CIA training of anti-Assad fighters.

Complicating these talks will be the tacit US cooperation with Iran in the counteroffensive by Iraqi government forces against ISIS positions in northern

Iraq. The town of Amerli was retaken last week in a joint operation by Kurdish troops, Iraqi government troops, and Iranian-backed Shiite militias, while US warplanes provided air cover and struck ISIS positions.

The BBC reported Friday that Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran’s top clerical official, has authorized military collaboration between Iranian commanders and US, Iraqi and Kurdish forces fighting ISIS.

While Iran’s foreign ministry officially denied the report, the subject is known to have come up in the ongoing talks in Geneva between Iran and the so-called P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) over Iran’s nuclear program. These talks are to resume September 18 in New York City.

General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, the overseas unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, has been photographed several times recently in Iraq, engaged in advising the Iraqi government and Shiite militias on military preparations against ISIS.

The Sunni-ruled Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain, as well as Israel, are vehemently opposed to Iran’s Shiite clerical regime and to Iran’s increasingly close relations with the Shiite-led government in Baghdad, as well as its alliance with the Assad regime in Syria and the Shiite Hezbollah militia in Lebanon.

American imperialism has stoked up religious and ethnic conflicts throughout the Middle East, particularly after its invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 brought a Shiite puppet regime to power and touched off a Sunni-Shiite civil war in the country.

Meanwhile, in an announcement that underscores the imperialist interests that underlie the decades of American and Western intervention in the Middle East, British-owned BP said Thursday that it had reached agreement with the Iraqi government to extend its lease on the enormous Rumaila oil field, the second-largest in the world. Its deal to lift oil from Rumaila was extended by five years, to 2034.



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