

# Obama's speech on ISIS: Perpetual war in Iraq, Syria and beyond

Patrick Martin  
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In his speech Wednesday night to the American people, President Obama presented a perspective of open-ended and unlimited military conflict throughout the Middle East and beyond.

The threat of a terrorist group that few Americans could identify six months ago, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as ISIL), is supposedly so great that it requires a major mobilization of US military and intelligence assets.

"This counterterrorism campaign will be waged through a steady, relentless effort to take out ISIL wherever they exist," Obama said, thereby declaring that there is no geographical limitation to the new US military intervention. Besides Iraq and Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are all potential arenas for battle.

Moreover, given the roots of ISIS in the CIA-organized airlift of Islamist fighters and weaponry from Libya to Syria after the 2011 US-NATO war that overthrew Muammar Gaddafi, US military action across North Africa and the Sahara is a likely extension of Obama's new stage in what the Bush-Cheney administration once called the "global war on terror."

The media barrage over the grisly ISIS executions of two American journalists has no doubt had at least a temporary effect on US public opinion. However, the United States is not going to war to avenge James Foley and Steven Sotloff, or to express outrage over the beheading of innocents. Otherwise, the US target would be the barbaric monarchy of Saudi Arabia—the most important US ally in the Middle East, after Israel—which, according to one report, beheaded 113 prisoners during the time Foley was held captive by ISIS.

The real reasons for the new US intervention in the Middle East are the same as those that drove the Bush-

Cheney administration in the previous round of bloodletting: the drive of American imperialism to control oil resources and maintain a dominant strategic position in the Middle East and, more broadly, the entire Eurasian continent.

In particular, the intervention against ISIS represents an effort by the White House to reverse the foreign policy debacle it suffered last year in Syria. Exactly one year ago, Obama pushed for air strikes against the government of Bashar al-Assad, with the goal of replacing it with a pro-US stooge regime. He was forced to pull back, in humiliating fashion, because of opposition from Russia, divisions within the US ruling elite, the failure of key US allies like Britain to join in the drive to war, and popular opposition.

The American ruling class responded by preparing the ground for a massive escalation in the Middle East, while organizing a coup in Ukraine targeting Russia, threatening to unleash a full-scale war with the second largest nuclear power in the world.

Obama's explicit statement that the US is planning on bombing targets in Syria—"I will not hesitate to take action against ISIL in Syria as well as Iraq," he said—underscores the determination of the ruling class to use the offensive by ISIS that began in June as a convenient pretext to finish what it started.

Immediately after the speech, plans were announced for a flood of military aid and training for US-backed oppositional forces that have been engaged in a protracted civil war in the country. The aid is to be coordinated by Saudi Arabia, one of the main backers of Islamic fundamentalist forces battling Assad, and a regional opponent of both Syria and Iran.

In pursuing its objectives in the Middle East, Obama's pledge not to resort to "boots on the ground" has zero credibility. Already, hundreds of US troops

and advisors have been dispatched to the region. Even before Obama went on national television, his secretary of state, John Kerry, was telling a Baghdad press conference that US combat troops would not return to Iraq unless “obviously, something very dramatic changes.” As former Democratic congressman Lee Hamilton, a fixture in the foreign policy establishment, observed, “That’s a loophole a mile wide.”

As always, decisions that impact the lives of hundreds of millions of people have been made behind closed doors by a small cabal, with plans drawn up in advance presented as a *fait accompli* to be rubber-stamped by Congress and sold by the media on the basis of lies.

In pursuing its objectives—what Obama referred to as the “core interests” of the United States—the ruling class operates without any legal constraint. Significantly, Obama admitted that there was no evidence that ISIS forces, which control much of eastern Syria and overran parts of western and northern Iraq during the summer, pose any threat to the United States. He argued instead, “If left unchecked, these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region, including to the United States.”

This amounts to a full-scale embrace of the doctrine of preventive war, espoused by Bush and Cheney as the basis for the invasion and conquest of Iraq. This doctrine is in direct defiance of international law, which declares that a country can initiate a war only in self-defense and forbids any country from launching a war by claiming to be responding to a potential threat arising in the future. The launching of such wars is the principal crime for which the Nazi leaders were indicted and convicted at the post-World War II Nuremberg Tribunal.

White House officials have argued that Obama has “all the authority he needs” to escalate the war in the Middle East, citing the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) adopted by Congress after the 9/11 attacks. Here again, Obama follows in the footsteps of Bush and Cheney, who used the AUMF as an all-purpose justification not only for military action overseas, but also for mass surveillance and indefinite detention at home.

The implementation of the new war in the Middle East underscores the mortal danger confronting the working class—in the region, in the United States and

around the world. The American ruling class has embarked on a permanent and ever-expanding war. Amidst an intensifying social and economic crisis, it is seeking to resolve its problems at home and abroad by asserting its domination in every region of the globe.

The logic of this drive is world war, a catastrophe that can be prevented only by the independent political intervention of the international working class and the abolition of the capitalist system.



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