

# Obama's "coalition of the willing" against Syria, Iran

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The Obama administration is rapidly putting together a "coalition of the willing" to ramp up its new war of aggression in the Middle East. Using the pretext of "degrading and destroying" Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias, Washington has revived its plans, put on hold last year, directed at ousting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and also aimed against Syria's backers, Iran and Russia.

Since Obama announced his war plans last Wednesday, US Secretary of State John Kerry has been criss-crossing the Middle East to drum up support for military action in Iraq and Syria and the arming and training of pro-Western militia inside both countries. France has already indicated its willingness to participate in air strikes in Iraq. Yesterday, the Australian government announced the dispatch of eight strike fighters and associated military aircraft, as well as 600 troops to the Middle East.

The latest barbaric ISIS beheading of British aid worker David Haines has proven very convenient for the British government, which last year was forced to pull out of the planned US-led air war against Syria. Amid widespread public opposition and divisions in ruling circles, British Prime Minister David Cameron lost a parliamentary vote authorising air strikes.

Just as Obama has exploited the ISIS murder of two American journalists to sway public opinion, temporarily at least, behind a new war in the Middle East, Cameron is attempting to do the same. Denouncing ISIS as "monsters" and the "embodiment of evil," he declared that Britain would proceed with the US and its allies to "dismantle and ultimately destroy ISIL [ISIS] and what it stands for." The British-based *Telegraph* reported yesterday that Cameron could announce air strikes as early as next week after attending the UN and reconvening parliament to

authorise military intervention.

In reality, ISIS is a creation of the US and its allies. It emerged as Al Qaeda in Iraq amid the sectarian bloodletting unleashed by the American-led occupation of Iraq from 2003. It morphed into ISIS as part of the US-backed regime-change operations in Libya and Syria initiated in 2011. ISIS established its prominent position in Syria, not as a result of popular support by the Syrian people, but through arms, funds and fighters from American allies in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

The absurdity of US claims that it will train and arm "moderate" anti-Assad forces in Syria to fight ISIS is underscored by a report Friday by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights that ISIS had reached a ceasefire with "moderate and Islamist rebels." An official from the pro-Western Syrian National Coalition, no doubt concerned that the report could jeopardise US arms and aid, vigorously denied that the Free Syrian Army (FSA) had reached anything other than a temporary truce to retrieve bodies. He noted, however, that he did not speak for the many other "moderate" and Islamist militias in Syria.

The Syrian opposition militias including ISIS, whatever their disputes and clashes, are united by their determination to oust Assad and unquestionably maintain close relations. The family of beheaded American journalist Steven Sotloff has reported that he was traded to ISIS by the "moderate" FSA for a sum of between \$25,000 and \$50,000. The FSA and other anti-Assad militias certainly welcome the prospect of American aid, training and arms but these will be directed primarily at the Syrian regime, not ISIS.

That is Washington's objective as well. An article in yesterday's *New York Times* based on discussions Obama held last week with senior journalists, former

officials and foreign policy experts, drew attention to the way in which the war on ISIS could rapidly transform into a wider war to topple Assad.

“He [Obama] made clear the intricacy of the situation, though, as he contemplated the possibility that Mr Assad might order his forces to fire at American planes entering Syrian airspace,” the *New York Times* reported. “If he dared to do that, Mr Obama said he would order American forces to wipe out Syria’s air defence system, which he noted would be easier than striking ISIS because its locations are better known. He went on to say that such an action by Mr Assad would lead to his overthrow.”

Of course, as it has done in the past, the US is quite capable of fabricating such an incident, if Assad does not order the military to respond to US air strikes, which are naked acts of aggression against a sovereign state. Nor would it simply be Syrian air defences that would be wiped out. Rather the Pentagon would set in motion plans drawn up at least a year ago to target the Syrian military and industrial base, including “command and control” centres, with Assad himself at the top of the list.

The wider US aims are also evident in the composition of the conference to be convened today in Paris to map out war plans. After France indicated that Iran might receive an invitation, US Secretary of State Kerry quickly ruled out the possibility, telling the media that it “would not be appropriate, given the many other issues that are on the table with respect to their engagement in Syria and elsewhere.” The last thing that Washington wants is for the Assad regime, or its backer Iran, itself a US target, to be part of the discussions.

Saudi Arabia, which was bitterly critical of Obama’s decision to call off air strikes against Syria last year, is only backing the new war because Riyadh understands it is directed against Assad, and also arch-rival Iran. The Saudi monarchy has agreed to provide the US with facilities to arm and train Syrian “moderates.” Last week Saudi Arabia hosted a gathering of 10 Arab states attended by Kerry that agreed to support efforts to destroy ISIS, including through their military involvement “as appropriate.”

As cited in yesterday’s *New York Times*, a senior US State Department official stated that at least some of the Arab countries had offered to take part in air strikes, including in Syria, and have been doing so for some

time.

The scope of what is being prepared goes far beyond the US air strikes that have already taken place against ISIS inside Iraq. Even that has been grossly understated. The Pentagon has focussed on the 156 airstrikes on ISIS vehicles, road blocks and other targets, but the number of sorties over the past month has been far higher—2,749 up until September 11, including reconnaissance and refuelling missiles. With France, Australia, possibly Britain and also Arab countries involved, the US is preparing a devastating air war in Iraq and Syria.



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