

The escalating US war in Iraq and Syria

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The real scope and purpose of Washington's escalating war in the Middle East is rapidly coming into relief as the Pentagon boosts its military forces in Iraq, more European allies commit warplanes and the media drumbeat grows for the US to directly target the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Since unleashing its bombing inside Syria on Tuesday, the US and its Gulf State allies have continued air raids on a daily basis, hitting targets associated not only with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) but the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra Front and the small, obscure Khorasan group.

After the initial, intense wave of air strikes, war planes attacked 12 small ISIS-controlled oil installations on Wednesday and conducted a further 10 strikes in Syria and Iraq on Thursday and Friday. To date, the US and its military partners have launched 43 strikes in Syria, and more than 200 inside Iraq since President Obama gave the green light on August 7.

In less than two months, what Obama declared to be a limited US "humanitarian mission" to protect the threatened Yazidi minority in Iraq has been transformed into a full-blown war in two countries. Preparations are already being made for the conflict's further expansion—on the ground and in the air.

Yesterday, Britain, Denmark and Belgium announced their commitment to the US-led air war, joining Australia, France and Canada, as well as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Denmark plans to deploy seven F-16 fighter jets for a year. Belgium has pledged six F-16s.

While Obama has ruled out committing US soldiers to combat, the Pentagon is putting in place the command infrastructure for the rapid deployment of American ground troops. The Pentagon announced on Thursday that the 1st Infantry Division headquarters, involving some 500 soldiers, would move to Iraq next month on a one-year deployment.

The divisional headquarters will be the first in Iraq since US forces withdrew from the country in late 2011. While the deployment is presented as reinforcing the role of US troops in advising, training and assisting Iraqi forces, it lays the basis for a dramatic expansion of ground forces. An American army division is made up of about 10,000 personnel.

At a press conference yesterday, US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, General Martin Dempsey, again made clear that "no one is under any illusions that air strikes alone will defeat ISIL [ISIS]." While declaring that the "ideal [ground] force" was "comprised of Iraqis and Kurds and moderate Syrian opposition [fighters]," he would not hesitate to recommend to the president "what it takes to destroy ISIL"—that is, including US combat troops.

Dempsey declared that the Obama administration's plan to arm and train 5,000 "moderate" Syrian opposition fighters in Saudi Arabia was not enough. "Five thousand [has] never been the end state," he declared, indicating that 12,000 to 15,000 trained fighters would be needed "to recapture lost territory in eastern Syria."

The main objective of the US war has never been to destroy ISIS, which is the creation of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and its more recent regime-change operations in Libya and Syria. Rather, ISIS's atrocities have provided a convenient justification for consolidating a more pliable US puppet regime in Baghdad and resuming plans, shelved a year ago, for a war to oust Syrian President Assad.

Within days of the first US air strikes inside Syria, the push for the US to turn its cruise missiles and bombs on the Assad regime is becoming more insistent. An article in the *New York Times* on Thursday, entitled "Clashing goals in Syria strikes put US in fix," declared that it was "increasingly uncertain whether the United States could maintain that delicate balance"

between punishing “terror organisations” and not aiding Assad.

The article cited the “crowing” of Syrian authorities that the air strikes put the US on their side, as well as the demands of Washington’s Middle East allies for attacks on the Assad regime. The emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, told the newspaper: “We need to create an army to fight the terrorists, but we also have to fight the regime. We have to do both.”

The autocratic Qatari ruler was not alone. Yesterday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for a “no fly zone” in Syria, adding to his previous calls for a buffer zone on the ground. While providing no details, he said he discussed the issue with Obama and Vice President Joe Biden. The establishment of a “no-fly zone” would not only strengthen the position of anti-Assad militias, but provide a pretext for an all-out US assault on the Syrian air force, air defence and other military facilities—as was the case in Libya in 2011.

Within Syria, thousands of people protested yesterday in towns and cities in opposition-held areas against the US air strikes. While the demonstrations no doubt gave vent to popular anger, particularly over the killing of civilians in the air raids, various anti-Assad militias, including the so-called moderate opposition, exploited the opportunity to demand that the US target the Syrian regime. Underlining the intimate collaboration between “moderates” and Islamists, pro-Western Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters denounced the attacks on Al Nusra.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that nearly a dozen FSA militias signed a declaration on Tuesday criticising the air strikes and demanding that the US attack the Syrian regime as well as ISIS. The signatories included groups that have been vetted by the US and receive American-made weapons from the CIA via its Military Operations Command across the border in Turkey.

The mounting demands from US allies inside Syria and across the Middle East to transform the war against ISIS into a war against Assad, are simply voicing what has been the Obama administration’s intention all along. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States only joined the attack on Syria because they understand that it will provide the opportunity to remove the Assad regime and weaken its ally Iran, which the Saudi monarchy regards as its arch-rival in the region.

The involvement of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, as well as major European powers, underscores the recklessness of Washington’s new war of aggression, which threatens to embroil Syria’s backers, Iran and Russia, in a far wider and more dangerous conflict.



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