

ISIS gains provide further pretext for US ground troops in Iraq and Syria

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Amid reports that nearly 350 US-led air strikes over the past three weeks have failed to stem advances by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias, there are mounting signs of justifications being prepared, and plans made, for an escalating presence of US ground forces in the region.

Low-flying US Apache helicopters have also joined the attacks on ISIS positions in Iraq, marking a major shift in the military intervention, and bringing closer the prospect of the full-scale involvement of “troops on the ground.”

For all President Obama’s denials of any intention to send “combat troops” into Iraq and Syria, the latest developments underline the fact that ISIS, itself the creation of the earlier US interventions in Iraq, Libya and Syria, has provided a pretext for a renewed US-led intervention to oust President Bashar al-Assad’s government in Syria.

Media reports from northern Syria indicate that ISIS fighters are getting closer to taking control of the Turkish border town of Kobane, also known as Ain al-Arab, which has been under siege by ISIS for the past three weeks. Street-to-street fighting is said to be underway with Kurdish militias, forcing the evacuation of all civilians.

Air strikes by the US and its allies failed to halt the advance of ISIS, which has besieged the town from three sides and pounded it with heavy artillery. ISIS has seized much of the area around Kobane, triggering an exodus of some 186,000 refugees into nearby Turkey.

If ISIS takes Kobane, it will command a large tract of land along the Turkish-Syrian border and for 300 kilometres down to Raqqa and Deir al-Zor, adding to the significant areas, including the cities of Mosul and Tikrit, it controls in northern and western Iraq.

In what could be a preparation for intervention,

Turkey increased its military presence in the Kobane area on Monday, locking down country roads and positioning a long line of tanks on a hill overlooking the border. Turkish troops also suppressed Kurdish protesters demanding to be permitted to join the battle against ISIS, clearing any gatherings with barrages of tear gas and water cannon.

Other media outlets fuelled calls for US ground intervention by reporting that Abu Ghraib, only about 40 kilometres from Baghdad, was in ISIS hands, bringing the capital, and particularly its international airport, within ISIS’s artillery range. ISIS also continued its advance elsewhere in Iraq’s western Anbar province, seizing Kubaisa, another town near the provincial capital, on Saturday.

The US Central Command, which is responsible for the US forces in the Middle East, announced yesterday that it was flying Apache helicopters against ISIS for the first time, thus exposing US troops to greater risk from ground fire. According to a spokesman, the helicopters struck at mortar teams and other units near Fallujah.

Christopher Harmer, a former Navy aviator who is now an analyst at the Institute for the Study of War think tank, told Reuters this was a significant escalation in the level of risk being taken by US troops. “When you’re flying a helicopter 150 feet (50 meters) above the ground, that helicopter can be shot with a rocket-propelled grenade or a heavy machine gun,” Harmer noted.

Any such losses, and in particular helicopter crew members falling into the hands of ISIS, would trigger further demands for the deployment of US ground forces.

In another ominous development, NATO’s recently installed secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, declared

that the US-dominated body stood ready to assist Turkey if it became involved in the Syrian conflict. “The Turks know that NATO will be there if there is any spillover and attacks on Turkey as a consequence of the violence we see in Syria,” he said.

Speaking from Poland, Stoltenberg said NATO’s main responsibility was to protect all allied countries and for this reason the military alliance had deployed Patriot missiles in Turkey. He claimed that NATO was facing “challenges” on its southern border, as well as its eastern flank, nominating both ISIS and Russia as “threats” to the alliance.

The implications of these events became clearer when Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu declared his country’s willingness to send troops into Syria, provided that it was part of a coordinated campaign to oust Assad. “We are ready to do everything if there is a clear strategy that after ISIS, we can be sure that our border will be protected,” he told CNN’s Christiane Amanpour in an interview that aired Monday.

For the past three years, the Turkish government, led by now President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has been heavily involved, alongside Washington, in helping fund and arm the Islamist militias, including ISIS, that launched the civil war against Assad. It criticised the US last year for shelving plans to bomb Syria.

Davutoglu told Amanpour that US air strikes in Syria were necessary but not enough for a victory, insisting that nothing would be resolved until Assad was removed. “If ISIS goes, another radical organisation may come in,” he said. “So our approach should be comprehensive, inclusive, strategic and combined ... to eliminate all terrorist threats in the future, and also to eliminate all brutal crimes against humanity committed by the regime.”

The Turkish prime minister asserted that ISIS had exploited Washington’s failure to move against Assad. Davutoglu also reiterated Turkey’s support “by all means” for the so-called moderate opposition in Syria. His comments underscore the real thrust of the supposed new “coalition of the willing” assembled by the US for its war in Iraq and Syria—to remove Assad’s government, which is backed by Iran and Russia.

Davutoglu said Turkey warned the West “several times” about the rise of radicalism in Syria. His remarks were also directed at putting a lid on the embarrassing admission made by US Vice President

Joe Biden last week, when he accused Turkey of funding and arming the jihadist groups in Syria, like ISIS, al-Nusra and other Al Qaeda-linked elements.

The truth is that the US and its regional allies, notably Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, poured weapons and millions of dollars into the hands of ISIS and other militias fighting the Syrian government, and only turned on ISIS after its conquests spread to Iraq, threatening to overturn the US puppet regime there.

Even now, while it seeks to halt ISIS’s advances, the US is arming and promoting “moderate” forces within Syria that are openly allied with al-Nusra and other Islamic fundamentalist groups. This includes the so-called Free Syrian Army, which has known ties to Islamist factions. According to media reports, Washington is still trying to decide which of these proxy forces it will train, arm and fund as it seeks to create a 5,000-strong anti-Assad army.

Behind the “war against ISIS,” the main target of American imperialism remains the Syrian government, which is why Turkey and other countries that fostered ISIS are now supporting the operation. Washington’s strategic goal remains the domination of the entire energy-rich and geo-strategically vital Middle East and Central Asia.



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