

Obama meets with US combat commanders amid mounting calls for ground troops

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President Barack Obama huddled with US combat commanders at the Pentagon Wednesday to assess the state of the military operations launched by his administration exactly two months ago in Iraq and extended last month with the first airstrikes in Syria.

The meeting with the military brass, followed by a rare session at the Pentagon of the National Security Council, was organized amidst a steadily escalating drumbeat of criticism of the present US military campaign as ineffective. There are growing demands for the deployment of American ground troops.

As the meetings took place, there was further evidence that American policy in the region is in a state of disarray, beset by the immense contradictions in US policy, which had backed Islamist militias in the war for regime change in Syria, and is now attempting to curb the largest of these sectarian-based armed groups, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), after its overrunning of roughly a third of Iraq's territory. American policy is further roiled by the conflicting agendas of the so-called "international coalition" that Obama has assembled to support the US-led war.

Secretary of State John Kerry Wednesday appeared to give support to a proposal by the Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for the creation of a "buffer zone" inside Syrian territory along the Turkish border.

"The buffer zone...is an idea that's out there, it's worth examining, it's worth looking at very, very closely," Kerry said.

At the same time, the US Secretary of State appeared to dismiss the significance of the fall of Kobani, a predominantly Kurdish city on the Syrian-Turkish border that has been under siege by ISIS forces, while blockaded by the Turkish armed forces across the border.

"As horrific as it is to watch in real time what is happening in Kobani...you have to step back and understand the strategic objective," he said.

Kerry was almost immediately contradicted by both the White House and the Pentagon, which indicated that Washington has no interest in signing on to the "buffer zone" project promoted by Turkey. The Pentagon, however, confirmed Kerry's assessment of the situation in Kobani, predicting its probable fall to ISIS, despite US airstrikes in the area.

The Erdogan government has promoted the creation of such a buffer, along with the imposition of a no-fly zone and the increased arming of Syrian "rebels," with the dual aims of suppressing the independent Kurdish area created on its border and focusing the US-led war on achieving the downfall of the Assad government in Syria.

While the Obama administration backs the war for regime change in Syria, it has an official policy of "Iraq first," directed at defeating the ISIS offensive in that country and, presumably, forcing the Islamist militia back across the border where it can resume the terrorist operations that Washington supports, directed against Damascus.

There are growing criticisms, however, that the US air war is failing to advance Washington's objectives.

The Associated Press published an analysis piece Wednesday entitled "US-led airstrikes produce few gains." It found that the hundreds of American bombing raids had "hardly dented the core of the Islamic State group's territory" and that the Islamists "have even succeeded in taking new territory from an Iraqi army that still buckles in the face of militants." The AP concluded that the central problem was the absence of any "allied forces on the ground able to capitalize on the airstrikes and wrest back territory from

the militants.”

Similarly, the *Washington Post* published an editorial Wednesday charging that the US intervention had failed to halt ISIS advances because of “the limitations imposed on the military campaign by President Obama,” particularly his having “ruled out...ground personnel despite requests from military commanders.”

The editorial concluded: “For now, the U.S. operation in Iraq and Syria is defined mainly by its limitations. The restrictions Mr. Obama has imposed on his commanders are not compatible with the objectives he has asked them to achieve.”

In an unexpected escalation of bellicose criticism of Obama’s Mideast war policy from within his own party, former Democratic President Jimmy Carter told a Texas newspaper that the administration had “waited too long” to attack ISIS and needed to deploy ground forces to defeat the Islamist movement.

“First of all, we waited too long,” Carter told the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*. “We let the Islamic State build up its money, capability and strength and weapons while it was still in Syria.”

Carter went on to argue that US ground troops were indispensable. “You have to have somebody on the ground to direct our missiles and to be sure you have the right target,” the ex-president said. “Then you have to have somebody to move in and be willing to fight ISIS after the strikes.”

In answering Carter’s comments, White House spokesman Josh Earnest concentrated his fire on something the ex-president never raised, implying that he was criticizing the administration for not having armed the Syrian “rebels.” “It certainly would put the United States at risk, because those weapons could pretty easily fall into the wrong hands if we didn’t know who we were giving them to,” Earnest said.

In the same breath, he acknowledged that “There are limitations associated with the exclusive use of air power,” while adding, “Our strategy [in Syria] is reliant on something that is not yet in place ... a Syrian opposition that can take the fight” to ISIS.

Pentagon officials have acknowledged that not only has no such training and vetting begun, but there has not even been a senior officer assigned to organize such a program. Pentagon estimates have indicated that it could take five years to field any credible US-backed “rebel” force. And the *Guardian* newspaper reported

Monday that a key Pentagon concern is “unreliable rebel forces turning their weapons on their US trainers,” much as took place in the so-called “green-on-blue” killings of American troops in Afghanistan.

Carter’s criticisms followed similar comments by two former Obama administration defense secretaries—Robert Gates and Leon Panetta—who have argued along similar lines in unusually caustic remarks about the US president’s policies.

Despite assertions by both the Pentagon and the White House that Wednesday’s meeting would produce no substantive change in US policy, the logic of the current campaign and the record of the Obama administration make the deployment of American ground forces in the new Middle East war a matter of when, rather than if.

Whatever the criticisms of the Obama administration’s air war’s limitations, it has conformed to the president’s announced policy of forgoing the stricture of establishing near certainty of avoiding civilian casualties that Washington claims it normally observes—despite the thousands of civilian deaths in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere.

The National Iraq News Agency reported that 22 civilians were killed Monday in a US airstrike on the ISIS-held town of Hit in Iraq’s Anbar province. The US bombs demolished a popular marketplace as well as nearby apartments. Among the dead were reportedly five women and eight children.



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