

Obama meets anti-ISIS “coalition” amid rising US-Turkish tensions

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President Barack Obama met at Andrews Air Force Base Tuesday with defense chiefs from over 20 countries that make up what he has touted as an international coalition to battle the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in a new US war in the Middle East, launched without the approval of either the United Nations or the US Congress.

White House and Pentagon officials cautioned before the meeting that no new decisions or commitments were expected from those participating. “It’s about coming together to discuss the vision, the challenges, the way ahead,” said a spokesman for Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who presided over the gathering.

Similarly, Alistair Baskey, spokesman for the US National Security Council, described the gathering as “an opportunity to take stock of coalition progress to date and continue to align and fully integrate the unique capabilities of coalition partners.”

Obama himself offered a noncommittal comment to the media after emerging from the meeting at the US air base just outside Washington. “This is going to be a long-term campaign,” he said. “There will be periods of progress and there will be setbacks.”

The latter have been the most evident in the past several days as a fairly limited number of US air strikes have failed to stop the drive by ISIS fighters in Syria to take the predominantly Kurdish city of Kobani on the Turkish border, and as their cohorts in Iraq have taken virtually all of the predominantly Sunni province of Anbar, while threatening the suburbs and airport of Baghdad.

Washington could not disguise the fact that the glorified photo opportunity at Andrews Air Force Base had been upstaged in the days preceding it by the open and acrimonious disagreements between the Obama administration and a key regional ally, Turkey.

Obama’s national security adviser, Susan Rice, announced Sunday that Ankara had agreed to US requests

to use southern Turkey’s Incirlik Air Base, where approximately 5,000 US military personnel are stationed, to carry out air strikes against both Iraq and Syria.

Within less than 24 hours, Turkish officials flatly denied that any such deal had been reached. They added that even a proposal that Turkey participate in the arming and training of “moderate Syrian rebels” to be turned into ground troops against ISIS and, at some point, the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad, had still to be finalized. In fact, Turkey, in collaboration with a CIA station set up near the Syrian border, has been giving the so-called rebels, including elements such as ISIS and the Al Qaeda-affiliated al Nusra Front, aid and refuge inside Turkey since the launching of the armed insurgency in Syria some three years ago.

The Obama administration announced the deal that Ankara repudiated with the apparent motive of demonstrating international backing and momentum for its imperialist intervention in the region. Instead, it has had precisely the opposite effect.

Revealed are the contradictory and conflicting interests of the various elements making up Obama’s supposed coalition, including Turkey, the monarchical Sunni Arab despots of the Gulf States, France, Germany (which has refrained from any direct military action), a few lesser European powers and Washington’s closest allies, Canada and Australia.

Both Washington and Turkey backed the war for regime change in Syria, in which ISIS emerged as the strongest armed antigovernment group among a collection of largely Sunni Islamist militias. While the Obama administration is now using the campaign against ISIS as a means of reasserting US hegemony over the region, including through regime change in Damascus, it is at odds with Turkey over the tactics and timing of this campaign.

The Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip

Erdogan has demanded that Washington agree to establishing a no-fly zone over Syria and a buffer zone inside Syrian territory as conditions for its participation in the US-led war. These proposals are aimed, in the first instance, at crushing the autonomous region carved out along the border by Syrian Kurds, who are allied with Turkey's Kurdish nationalist movement, the PKK, and at quickly turning the US war into a direct drive to overthrow the Assad government.

Washington has insisted that it is pursuing an "Iraq first" strategy, centering its intervention on "degrading" and "destroying" the ISIS forces inside Iraq, and has carried out its limited operations in Syria with the approval of the Assad regime, even as it insists that the government in Damascus is not "legitimate."

Erdogan drove home the depth of the disagreements on Monday, ordering Turkish warplanes to carry out air strikes, not against ISIS in Syria, but against the PKK, whose fighters, alongside Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish militias, have been the sole ground forces to effectively challenge the advance of ISIS in either country. In Iraq, they have operated in tacit coordination with US military "advisers," despite being on a State Department list of foreign terrorist organizations.

Turkey claimed that the air strikes in southeastern Turkey were in retaliation for PKK attacks on Turkish military bases, which was denied by the PKK itself. The attacks, the first in nearly two years of peace negotiations between the government and the PKK, follow a week of violent clashes across Turkey that left at least 35 people dead, as Turkish Kurds, who make up close to 20 percent of the population, took to the street to protest Ankara's blockade of the besieged city of Kobani.

The Turkish press reported this week that Turkish forces have not only blocked Kurdish fighters, arms and ammunition from reaching Kobani, but have even refused entry to wounded Kurdish fighters from the city, leaving them to bleed to death on the border.

The latest air strikes threaten to upend the peace talks between Ankara and the PKK, reigniting a civil war that claimed some 40,000 lives over the course of three decades.

Erdogan also used a speech at Marmara University in Istanbul Monday to declare that the greatest threat facing Turkey was that "new Lawrence of Arabias" were destabilizing the region. The reference was to British officer T.E. Lawrence, who helped organize an Arab insurgency against the Ottoman Turkish Empire—then aligned with Germany in World War 1.

Hitting out at the PKK, journalists and political rivals, Erdogan made no mention of ISIS. Instead, he warned that these forces were "making Sykes-Picot agreements hiding behind freedom of press, a war of independence or jihad."

The Sykes-Picot accord, concluded in 1916, carved up the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire—including both Iraq and Syria, as well as Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine, into colonies of British and French imperialism. The deal laid the artificial boundaries for the imperialist-imposed division of the region into separate nation states, a system that is now in an advanced state of collapse under the combined weight of its own internal contradictions and the relentless pressure of successive predatory imperialist interventions.

"Each conflict in this region has been designed a century ago," Erdogan said. "It is our duty to stop this."

The carve-up that Erdogan fears most is the emergence of an independent Kurdistan, which is why his regime has sought to seal off Kobani and allow ISIS to pummel its Kurdish defenders. His reactionary answer appears to be the revival of Turkish hegemony over the region, beginning with the installation of a Sunni Islamist regime in Damascus.

Denouncing this strategy last week, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian charged that the Erdogan government was pursuing a policy of "neo-Ottomanism" in the Middle East and vowed that Tehran would not allow the Syrian government, its sole Arab ally, to be overthrown by outside powers. He also said that Iran was seeking to aid the Kurds in Kobani, a possible prelude to Iranian backing for a renewed Kurdish insurgency inside Turkey itself.

While the US-led war has registered no discernible advances against ISIS in either Iraq or Syria, it is already creating sharp tensions that can erupt into a conflict that could engulf the entire region and beyond.



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