

# US boosts air war in Syria

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17 October 2014

In what points to an escalating US-led war inside Syria and Iraq, the US military has substantially boosted the number of its airstrikes, centred on the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobani near the Turkish border. American war planes have carried out at least 54 strikes inside Syria this week, 53 of them on targets in Kobane. Since the bombing of Syria began last month, more than 180 air strikes have been carried out, more than twice the number in Iraq.

Kurdish fighters from the People's Protection Units (YPG) have been battling an offensive by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) forces to seize the strategic border town for weeks. Fighting continued yesterday despite claims by Kurdish militants to the BBC that ISIS was in retreat. Reporting on the latest air strikes, the US Central Command commented that "the security situation on the ground remains tenuous."

US air support for the YPG militias, which is allied to the Kurdish separatist movement inside Turkey, the PKK, will only further complicate Washington's relations with Ankara. The Turkish government is demanding that the war be explicitly directed against the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad, as well as ISIS, and the establishment of US-backed no-fly and buffer zones inside Syria. Turkish security forces massed on the border near Kobane have restricted support to the YPG, concerned that its victory could encourage the PKK within Turkey.

Nevertheless, Washington has quietly been establishing relations with the YPG and its political front, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). A senior US Defence Department official told the *New York Times* on Wednesday that a system was in place to enable Kurdish fighters to feed information on ISIS targets to US mission planners. US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki acknowledged yesterday that American officials held direct talks with the PYD last weekend for the first time, but was at pains to stress the

meeting did "not represent coordination."

The talks with the PYD came after Pentagon spokesman John Kirby complained last week: "We don't have a willing, capable, effective partner on the ground inside Syria right now. It's just a fact." For the past three years, the US and its regional allies have been financing and arming largely Sunni opposition militias, including ISIS, in a sectarian war to overthrow Assad, who is backed by Iran's Shiite regime. The so-called "moderate" militias that the US is now proposing to arm and train have been working closely with the Al Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front as well as ISIS.

Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Gulf States have backed the new war in Iraq and Syria, understanding that Washington's main target remains Assad, rather than ISIS. However, pressure is mounting for the Obama administration to focus the war more directly against the Syrian military and government. During a press conference on Monday, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, expressed growing impatience and lashed out at Assad's backer Iran, declaring that "Iranian forces in Syria are occupying forces" propping up an "illegitimate" leader.

In Iraq, the US-backed puppet government is facing a continuing challenge from ISIS and allied Sunni militia. With large areas of the predominantly-Sunni, western province of Anbar under ISIS control, Baghdad itself remains under threat. Yesterday, more than 40 people were killed and dozens wounded in two car bombings in largely Shiite areas of the capital. ISIS seized control of the city of Fallujah in January and is reportedly poised to mount an offensive against the nearby town of Amariya al-Fallujah, just 40 kilometres to the west of Baghdad.

The Obama administration pressured Nouri al-Maliki to resign as Iraqi prime minister in August to make way for a "more inclusive" government. Two months later,

however, his replacement, Haider al-Abadi, who also represents the ruling Shiite alliance, has failed to fill the key ministries of defence and interior, amid continuing bitter sectarian and ethnic rivalries. After his latest nominees were rejected by parliament yesterday, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Haider was going to put forward a nominee of the Badr Corps, a Shiite militia notorious for its persecution of Sunnis.

US plans to forge Sunni National Guard units with the support of Sunni tribes to counter ISIS in Iraq have also run up against sectarian enmity. A *Bloomberg.com* article on Monday reported that Sunni tribal leaders who met recently with US special envoy, General John Allen, were sceptical about the plan and distrustful of the central government.

The plan is modelled on the Sunni Awakening militias funded and armed under the US occupation to combat Al Qaeda in Iraq, the forerunner of ISIS. Retired US Colonel Derek Harvey, who was closely involved in the Sunni Awakening, told *Bloomberg.com* that the US would need to deploy 4,000 to 6,000 troops, including special operations advisers and support personnel, for the proposal to work. “It’s a war zone right now, and you can’t just put an advisory team out there [in Anbar],” he said.

As the US seeks to consolidate its presence in Iraq and further its plans for regime-change in Syria, the logic of the military situation in both countries points to a further escalation of the war. Writing in the *Washington Post* on Tuesday, columnist David Ignatius, who has close ties with the Obama administration and the US defence establishment, pointed to growing calls for an expanded US military role, particularly from Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and US Secretary of State John Kerry.

While not citing sources, Ignatius outlined a long list of proposals, which included: the far greater use of Apache helicopter gunships as well as their basing in western Anbar province; a dramatic increase in US air strikes from an average of 10 sorties a day to 150-200; the implementation of Turkey’s demands for no-fly and buffer zones; an ultimatum to the Assad government to end its bombing of “moderate” opposition militias; and the accelerated US training and arming of fighters in Iraq and Syria.

Ignatius concluded his list with the item to “authorise

US advisers to join the ‘assault echelon’ when Iraqis go into battle”—in other words, to send American troops into combat, something that Obama pledged not to do. In this war based on lies to further American imperialist dominance in the energy-rich Middle East, this promise seems increasingly likely to be dispensed with sooner rather than later.



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