

# Obama administration considers sending more “advisers” to Iraq

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Washington is considering escalating the number of military “advisers” deployed in its new Middle East war following recent discussions between US and Iraqi officials in Baghdad and other parts of Iraq.

A senior official of the Obama administration, speaking on condition of anonymity, told reporters Tuesday that the beefed up deployment would be aimed at aiding the Iraqi security forces in retaking some one-third of the country now controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The issue was discussed during a visit to Iraq by a US delegation headed by Deputy White House National Security Adviser Antony Blinken last week. The administration official stressed that “Iraq is not requesting American ground forces and, in any event, President Barack Obama would not send them,” according to the Reuters news agency.

In point of fact, leading officials in Iraq’s predominantly Sunni Anbar province, roughly 80 percent of which has been overrun by ISIS, called earlier this month for US ground troops to be deployed there. The province was the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting during the nearly nine-year US occupation of Iraq.

And, as for Obama’s promise about no “ground forces,” this term is used in a manner that does not apply to special operations troops, advisers and other smaller units, but rather to the deployment of full combat brigades.

The announcement that the topic was discussed by US and Iraqi officials almost certainly indicates that preparations are being made to substantially increase the number of US military personnel deployed in Iraq, which, according to official figures, now stands at over 1,400.

The *Washington Post* indicated Wednesday that the

discussion on an escalation of the US military deployment is taking place in the context of “a campaign plan for offensive operations by Iraqi ground forces to gradually reclaim towns and cities that have been occupied by” ISIS.

This campaign, “may also include US advisers in the field with the Iraqis, should that be recommended by American military commanders,” the *Post* reports, citing an unnamed senior US official. The report reflects extreme pessimism that Iraqi security forces are prepared to wage such a campaign. “The Pentagon has assessed that, at best, only about half of Iraqi army units are currently capable of effective fighting,” it states.

Reuters provided an even more dire estimate, citing an Iraqi intelligence officer as stating that in Anbar “while as many as 60,000 soldiers may be listed on the books, in reality there are no more than 20,000 across the province.” The discrepancy is due in large measure to “the presence of ghost soldiers—enrolled men who do not turn up and fight but whose salaries go into the pockets of the commanders.”

Iraqi forces collapsed in the face of an ISIS offensive last June that intersected with a broader Sunni insurgency against the abuses of the Shia sectarian government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which was installed under the US occupation.

Now, the administration and the Pentagon are confronting the realities and insoluble contradictions of a crisis that is entirely of Washington’s own making. It is the product of successive US imperialist interventions—first in the decimation of Iraqi society in a war of aggression and then in the arming and funding of a sectarian-based war for regime change that has ravaged Syria, and in which ISIS emerged as the strongest of the Sunni Islamist militias fighting for the

overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad.

The catastrophes created by these crimes are being invoked as justification for an even bigger crime, a regional war in which US imperialism is seeking once again to assert its hegemony over the oil-rich and strategically vital Middle East.

Growing dissatisfaction over the Obama administration's Middle East strategy is finding increasingly vocal expression from sources close to the US military.

In a report entitled "The Air War Against the Islamic State," former Pentagon official Anthony Cordesman, the chief military analyst for the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, gives a withering assessment of the US intervention thus far:

"Two months into the air campaign, it ... seems to be doing too little, too slowly, failing to have the impact needed in Iraq, and drifting towards major mission creep in Syria. Each of the major risks that it is intended to help address remain as serious—or more serious—than when it began, and the creation of a US-Arab-European alliance has only had marginal impact."

Cordesman described the air war as so small compared to other recent US bombing campaigns—particularly in the first and second US wars on Iraq—as to amount to "military tokenism."

He pointed out, based on the Pentagon's own reports, that, while the cost of this war is now estimated at \$10 million a day, barely 5 percent of the sorties being flown by US warplanes result in air strikes.

Cordesman argues that this can only be remedied by putting US "boots on the ground" in combat operations, not only in Iraq, but in Syria as well.

"Providing effective intelligence, target, and feedback for air operations is also only one part of the need for forward advisors that can help the Iraqi Army become an effective forces [sic] as soon as possible," he writes. "Help in combat leadership, maneuver, making meaningful requests for rear support, and getting honest reports to higher echelons of command are equally critical. This means putting small numbers of advisors forward and risking combat losses, but it seems to be essential—not only for the Iraqi Army, but for the Pesh Merga, the new Sunni National Guard Units to be formed in Sunni areas in Iraq and rebel units in Syria."

Similarly, in an interview last weekend, Lt. Col. John Nagl (ret.), the co-author of the Army's

Counterinsurgency Manual, told National Public Radio that the US war in Iraq and Syria would "require the commitment of US troops for at least a generation and probably longer."

Nagl said that in the immediate period ahead, "we need about 15,000 American advisers on the ground in Iraq in 12- to 20-man teams."

Nagl acknowledged that there is no support within the American public for such an intervention, quickly adding: "So the president has the extraordinary advantage of having an all-volunteer force that is as battle tested, as battle trained as any force the United States has ever had. And these guys know, they understand what we're asking them to do. They're willing to stay there and occupy Iraq."



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