

Washington moving towards wider war in Iraq and Syria

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There are new indications that Washington is moving toward a wider and protracted military intervention in the Middle East in the name of combating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In the wake of last weekend's collapse of US-backed Syrian "rebels" in the face of an offensive by Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, the Al Nusra Front, plans are being prepared to extend the three-month-old US-led bombing campaign deeper into Syria. The ostensible purpose of these air strikes would be to provide air support for the Western-backed militias formed to prosecute the war for regime change against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The concern within US military and intelligence circles is that the Nusra Front fighters appear poised to seize control of the strategic Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey, which has served as a key conduit for funneling arms and other aid to the Syrian "rebels."

A substantial portion of that aid, including heavy weapons such as TOW anti-tank missiles and GRAD rockets, fell into the hands of the Nusra Front last weekend as the American-backed groups—the Syrian Revolutionary Front and Harakat Hazm (Steadfastness Movement)—surrendered without a shot being fired. Many of the members of these groups then joined the Nusra Front.

"The recent fighting in northwestern Syria has been taking place a long way from areas farther east where US and Arab warplanes have been pounding Islamic State positions," the *Washington Post* reported Wednesday. "But US concern has grown rapidly in recent days amid fears about the [Bab al-Hawa] border crossing, according to senior administration officials who spoke about internal discussions on the condition of anonymity."

The report cited discussions about likely "complications" arising from air strikes in the area, in particular whether the Syrian government would "tolerate an expansion" of the war beyond Iraq and areas of Syria near the Iraqi border, which have fallen under ISIS control.

There are, however, multiple demands that Washington carry out such an expansion with the aim of directing the US-led war precisely at toppling the Assad regime.

This is the position being advanced by the governments of both France and Turkey. French foreign minister Laurent Fabius wrote an opinion column published by several media organizations earlier this week calling on the US and its allies to shift the military intervention away from the Kurdish border town of Kobane, where there have been regular US bombings, to the city of Aleppo. Previously Syria's industrial capital, Aleppo has been the scene of stepped up fighting as the Syrian government seeks to consolidate its control by defeating the so-called rebels.

"France cannot resign itself to the breakup of Syria or to the abandonment of the Aleppans to this fate," Fabius wrote. "That is why—together with our coalition partners—we must focus our efforts on Aleppo, with two clear objectives: strengthening our support for the moderate Syrian opposition, and protecting the civilian population from the twin crimes of the regime and Daesh [ISIS]. After Kobane, we must save Aleppo."

Just two days later, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu warned that if Aleppo were to fall to the government forces, Turkey could face a major new refugee crisis. "This is why we called for a safe zone as well as taking measures against not only the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [ISIS] but also the Assad regime," he said. Turkey has called for the creation of a

“buffer zone” inside Syria along the Turkish border. Such a “buffer” would serve the dual purpose of providing a safe haven for the Western-backed “rebels” and breaking up the autonomous zones created in the border area by Syrian Kurds, which Ankara sees as a threat in terms of its own conflict with the country’s Kurdish population.

Turkey has also advocated the imposition of a “no fly zone,” which would entail a massive bombing campaign against Syria’s air force and air defenses.

These same positions find support within Washington from, among others, Arizona Republican Senator John McCain, who, after Tuesday’s midterm election, will become chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, giving him access to a significant lever for shifting the US toward a more aggressive policy.

On the eve of the election, McCain charged that the collapse of the American-backed “rebels” to the Nusra Front constituted proof that “the administration’s current strategy in Syria is a disaster.” He demanded a greater military intervention to “protect the Syrian people.”

An escalation of the war is a virtual certainty now the US midterm elections are over. As *Foreign Policy* commented Wednesday: “When it comes to foreign policy, a GOP win could make it easier for Obama ... if the president decided to shift his strategy against the Islamic State, [to] win Congressional backing for sending ground troops to Iraq or Syria.”

A revealing indication of the intense and protracted character of the war that US imperialism is preparing in the Middle East was provided by the *Washington Post*’s well-connected national security correspondent, Walter Pincus.

“The Defense Department is certainly preparing for a long fight,” Pincus wrote, citing a recent notice to military contractors of department plans for an eight-year contract for the Air Combat Command of the US Air Force, set to begin in October 2016. The contract is for operating and supporting the command’s “major war reserve materiel facilities in Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.”

Among the items to be pre-positioned at these sites are mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles (MRAPs), massive amounts of ammunition and “medical contingency hospitals for expeditionary medical support.” The plan also calls for creating “facilities and

equipment that could house 3,300 airmen and 72 fighter aircraft at expeditionary locations.”

In the meantime, the Pentagon’s Central Command announced Wednesday it had carried out four air strikes in Syria and 10 in Iraq since Monday. A CENTCOM spokesman said the strikes had hit various ISIS vehicles, bunkers and small units.

From Iraq itself, however, came a different account of the US bombing runs. In al-Qaim, in western Anbar province near the Syrian border, security officials told the National Iraqi News Agency that a US warplane fired two missiles into a popular market in the center of the city. The explosions ripped through the crowded market, leaving at least seven Iraqi civilians dead and 27 others wounded, many of them critically.



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