

Obama hints at escalation of Iraq-Syria war

Patrick Martin
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President Obama ended the G7 summit in Bavaria Monday with a press conference where he took several questions on the deepening crisis in the Middle East and North Africa, and dropped hints of an impending US escalation of the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The summit itself focused largely on the mounting threats by the US and the European Union against Russia over the crisis in eastern Ukraine. But officials of three countries engaged in conflicts with Islamist insurgents—Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi of Iraq, President Caid Essebsi of Tunisia, and President Muhammad Buhari of Nigeria—traveled to the Alpine resort hotel for talks with the G7 leaders.

The official summit communiqué did little more than recycle boilerplate about the need to fight terrorism by curbing the flow of funds and foreign fighters into the Middle East and northern Africa, as well as “implementing the necessary measures to detect and prevent acts of terrorism” within the G7 countries themselves—i.e., step up the assault on the democratic rights of Muslim minorities and of the population as a whole.

The G7 statement welcomed “the continued efforts of the Global Coalition to counter” ISIS in Iraq and Syria, a “coalition” which includes all the G7 participants themselves, as well as the reactionary oil sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf. But it gave no hint of further actions.

This was left to Obama at his press conference, where he was asked about the US response to the debacle suffered by the Iraqi government—and its Washington patron—with the fall of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, captured by ISIS last month.

The American media, in particular, seemed to anticipate a significant escalation of the US military presence in Iraq. One reporter asked, “In today’s bilateral [meeting] with Prime Minister Abadi, you pledged to step up assistance to Iraq. I’m wondering if

that includes additional U.S. military personnel.”

Obama indicated that the main focus of US intervention was “accelerating the number of Iraqi forces that are properly trained and equipped and have a focused strategy and good leadership.” He continued: “We don’t yet have a complete strategy because it requires commitments on the part of the Iraqis, as well, about how recruitment takes place, how that training takes place. And so the details of that are not yet worked out.”

This last remark was widely commented on in the American media as an indication of the disarray in US policy in Iraq and Syria. It came on the eve of the first anniversary of the ISIS capture of Mosul, Iraq’s third-largest city, an event which shook the US puppet regime in Baghdad, as thousands of Iraqi Army soldiers abandoned their weapons, stripped off their uniforms and fled the attack of a much smaller force of Sunni Islamist insurgents.

The reporter pressed the issue, asking, “Is it fair to say that additional military personnel—U.S. military personnel—are what’s under consideration?”

Obama conceded that this was true, although he tried to present it as limited to training rather than more direct participation in combat operations. “I think what is fair to say is that all the countries in the international coalition are prepared to do more to train Iraqi security forces,” he said.

He acknowledged, however, that there were “places where we’ve got more training capacity than we have recruits.” In other words, because of the opposition of the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad, there has been little recruitment of Sunni tribal fighters, let alone the formation of a Sunni-based National Guard force to fight in Anbar and other Sunni-populated provinces.

Obama emphasized the role of the Pentagon in preparing plans to reverse the gains made by ISIS, declaring that, “when a finalized plan is presented to

me by the Pentagon, then I will share it with the American people.” This presents, perhaps more bluntly than Obama intended, the real relationship: the military will decide the policy, and then Obama will serve as its political front.

Given the evident inability of the Baghdad regime to counter ISIS, there is little doubt that the US military brass is pushing for a drastic increase both in the number of American troops and in the scope of their deployment, including combat roles such as spotting for air strikes.

As McClatchy News Service noted in an article on the anniversary of the fall of Mosul, which took place June 10, 2014, “The number of people living under Islamic State rule has grown since the U.S. bombing began. Virtually the entire population of the mostly Sunni province of Anbar, Iraq’s largest, is under the group’s control, with the addition in May of Ramadi, the provincial capital, a city of nearly 900,000. In Syria, the city of Palmyra, a famed tourist destination, also fell to the Islamic State in May, and most of the province of Deir el Zour, an important oil producing area, has come under Islamic State control since the onset of the U.S. bombing campaign.”

While US officials claim the bombing campaign has killed 10,000 ISIS fighters since it began, these losses have been more than replaced by an influx of new recruits to the Islamist group. A recent UN report estimated that the number of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria had risen 70 percent over the past year.

The geographic scope of ISIS actions, or actions by its sympathizers, has continued to expand. On Tuesday three ISIS militants disguised as Iraqi Army soldiers attacked a local government office at Amiryat al-Falluja, on the western edge of the Baghdad metropolis, killing eight people and wounding seventeen. There were also several car bombings in eastern and northern Baghdad, targeting either army patrols or shopping areas in Shiite-populated districts.

While the position of ISIS appears to be stronger in both Iraq and Syria since the US bombing campaign began, the position of the Assad government in Damascus has significantly deteriorated. In the past few months, key positions in the northeast (Idlib), south (Daraa) and east-central (Palmyra) have fallen to various opposition forces, including the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda, the al-Nusra Front, and ISIS launched an

attack on another provincial capital, Hasakeh in the northeast, last week.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel suggested that the G7 should work “in tandem” with Russia to find a solution to Syria—in other words, to pressure Assad to step down—and she described Moscow as an “important player” in the Middle East.

British Prime Minister David Cameron echoed this sentiment after an hour-long meeting with Obama largely focused on the war with ISIS. His office issued a statement confirming Merkel’s view. “The idea is that it might be possible to work with the Russians on a transition with a different leadership in Syria,” the statement said. “The Prime Minister has spoken to President Putin about this and it was also discussed by the American Secretary of State John Kerry when he visited Russia recently.”

The attempt to court Putin’s support in Syria, while threatening Russia with military exercises on air, sea and land, all along the Russian border with Europe, is another demonstration of the incoherent and contradictory character of imperialist policy in the Middle East. There is only one consistent thread—the imperialist powers are determined to maintain their domination of the oil wealth of the region, and will kill as many people as necessary to do so.



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