

Obama authorizes escalation of US war against Syria

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President Barack Obama has authorized US air strikes to defend a small band of Pentagon-trained mercenaries inside Syria, including against any potential attack by Syrian government forces.

The blanket permission for employing US air power, ostensibly in support of less than 60 “rebels” who have been trained, armed and paid by the US military supposedly to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), paves the way for a dramatic escalation of the war for regime change against the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The threat of an intensified US air war came as a group of independent journalists released a report substantiating the deaths of at least 459 civilians, including 100 children, in just six months as a result of air strikes launched by the US and other members of Washington’s so-called coalition. Just one attack, launched against Hawija, Iraq on June 3, killed over 70 civilians.

The group, Airwars, listed only those casualties it could verify based on media reports, cross-referenced with the US military’s reports of air strikes. Undoubtedly, the true scope of US war crimes in the ongoing campaign in Iraq and Syria is far greater.

The new policy on air strikes was first reported by the *Wall Street Journal* Monday. It follows a debacle suffered by Division 30, the militia from which the Pentagon has drawn its meager batch of recruits. Late last week, the al-Nusra Front, Syria’s Al Qaeda affiliate, which, along with ISIS, constitutes the principal fighting force against the Assad government, captured the commander of Division 30 as well as the officer in charge of the US mercenaries, along with six others from the Pentagon-trained force. A number of others were killed and wounded in Nusra Front attacks, with a total rout prevented only by US air strikes.

The reaction from both Washington and Division 30 made it clear that the US and its proxies were unprepared for these attacks, having viewed the Nusra Front as a de

facto ally with which the US trained-mercenaries were participating in a “united front,” as a Division 30 appeal to the Al Qaeda affiliate put it.

The new rules of engagement go further than what the US Air Force has already put into practice. “For offensive operations, it’s ISIS only,” a senior military official told the *Wall Street Journal*. “But if attacked, we’ll defend them against anyone attacking them. We’re not looking to engage the regime, but we’ve made a commitment to help defend these people.”

A Pentagon spokesman, Capt. Jeffrey Davis, confirmed the *Journal* report Monday, declaring that the US military would provide defensive fire in support of the “New Syrian Force,” as Washington refers to its mercenaries, “no matter whom they come up against.”

White House National Security spokesman Alistair Baskey said that the Obama administration was making it clear that it will “take the steps necessary to protect them,” including through “defensive fire support.”

These new rules, according to the *Journal*, were recommended by the Pentagon and rubber-stamped by Obama. The distinction between “offensive” and “defensive” operations is entirely spurious, particularly when dealing with an isolated force of a few dozen fighters with no real capability of launching any operations whatsoever on its own.

US military officials tried to play down the prospects of direct combat between US and Syrian government forces “at least in the near term,” the *Journal* reported, portraying any Syrian government attack on the US mercenaries as unlikely given their supposed mission of fighting ISIS. They touted the guarantee of US air strikes as something that “could help persuade prospective recruits the Pentagon is serious about protecting them, including against the regime.”

All of this is so much eyewash, designed to lull the American people in the face of the mounting threat of a

new full-scale US war in the Middle East.

The reality is that, to the extent that the US mercenaries are able to survive at all in Syria, it will only be in an alliance with the main Islamist militias, including the Nusra Front, which have been armed, funded and supported by Washington's key regional allies—Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in close collaboration with the CIA. These forces are in continuous combat with Syrian government troops.

As for overcoming recruitment problems, these stem not from concern over a lack of air cover so much as the reluctance of Syrians to be identified as US stooges, on the one hand, and, on the other, the difficulty confronted by the Pentagon in vetting recruits, who in their overwhelming majority share the sectarian and extreme Islamist ideology common to both ISIS and the Nusra Front.

The only conceivable role for the miniscule force fielded by the Pentagon is to serve as a decoy to draw fire from Syrian government forces and thereby provide the pretext for US military attacks against the regime.

These rules of engagement have been promulgated in the context of a deal reached between the US and Turkey that allows US warplanes to use Turkish airbases for strikes against Syria, while at the same time committing both Washington and Ankara to the carving out of a “safe zone” or “ISIS-free zone” along a swathe of Syrian territory abutting the Turkish border. Turkey has long advocated the creation of such a zone as a means of escalating the bloody four-year sectarian civil war waged for the purpose of overthrowing Assad.

The resulting scenario is increasingly taking on the contours of the US-NATO war for regime change that ended in the toppling and murder of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 and the subsequent decimation of Libyan society. Then too, the US and its allies claimed to be carrying out a “defensive” operation against the Libyan military in support of Islamist militias by imposing a “no-fly zone” over Libyan territory.

The Obama administration's shift in tactics may well be an attempt to placate elements in the US military and intelligence apparatus as well as the Republican right, which were critical of his backing down from preparations to attack Syria in September 2013 over spurious chemical weapons charges. The postponement of war based on a deal brokered by Russia triggered bitter recriminations within these layers.

Added impetus for a shift to a more hardline policy on Syria has come with the hysterical denunciations of the

administration over the P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran, Syria's main ally.

As the new rules of engagement were being announced in Washington, Secretary of State John Kerry was in Doha, meeting with the foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the collection of Sunni oil monarchies that comprise the principal sponsors of the Islamist militias that have ravaged Syria.

Kerry's main message was a US pledge to back these royal despots against Iran and employ US power in curtailing Iran's influence. In addition to “expedited” arms shipments to these regimes, Kerry promised stepped-up anti-Iranian military exercises in the region.

Pointing to the growing danger that the US will ignite a wider conflagration, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, also in Doha for a meeting with both Kerry and Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, said that Obama's guarantee of air cover for the Pentagon's mercenaries “is a violation of international law and represents an obstacle on the road to forming a united front to fight terrorism, including Islamic State and al-Nusra Front.”

Russia, which has been a principal supporter of Assad, appears to be attempting to broker another deal with the aim of staving off a direct confrontation with US imperialism over Syria. It is far from clear, however, that Washington will accept such a settlement. A proposal to further escalate the US war was spelled out Sunday by US Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination.

Appearing on CBS's “Face the Nation,” Graham said that air strikes were inadequate for defeating ISIS and that “you're going to need boots on the ground, not only in Iraq, but Syria.”

Graham argued that “there's got to be some regional force formed with an American component, somewhere around 10,000 American soldiers, to ally with Arab armies in the region and go into Syria and take back territory” from ISIS. Such a proposal sets the stage for a new US killing spree in the Middle East, potentially bloodier than the one launched in Iraq in 2003.



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