

# US signals military escalation in Iraq and Syria

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Amid a flurry of diplomatic activity regarding a possible political settlement in Syria, the Obama administration is signaling its intention to escalate US military action in both Syria and Iraq.

On Friday, the same day as an inconclusive meeting in Vienna between US Secretary of State John Kerry and the foreign ministers of Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey on the civil war in Syria, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter told reporters there would be more US combat actions like the one the previous day that had resulted in the first US troop death in Iraq since 2011.

On October 22, US special forces participated in a joint attack with Kurdish Peshmerga fighters against an Islamic State (ISIS) installation near Kirkuk in northern Iraq. Master Sgt. Joshua Wheeler was killed in what the Pentagon claims was a successful action to free 70 prisoners being held by ISIS. The attack was the first publicly acknowledged US combat operation since Washington launched its new war in Iraq, ostensibly against ISIS, in June of 2014.

The operation and the death of Wheeler shattered the repeated claims of President Barack Obama that the current US intervention in Iraq would not involve direct American combat actions. But Carter, far from presenting the Kirkuk incident as an aberration, unconditionally defended the operation and seized on it as an opportunity to assert the intention of the US military to intensify its operations in Iraq.

“There will be more raids,” Carter said at Friday’s Pentagon press conference. Confirming reports that he had personally authorized the raid, he added that American forces “will be in harm’s way, there’s no question about it.” He further declared that the US was “committed to enhancing the support we provide” to anti-ISIS forces in Iraq.

A White House spokesman also defended the raid, saying it was “consistent with our mission to train, advise and assist Iraqi forces.”

Carter’s defense of last Thursday’s US combat operation is consistent with other developments pointing to intensified US military involvement in Iraq beyond the current campaign of air strikes against ISIS forces. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joe Dunford, after visiting Iraq last week said it was time to “open the aperture” in military operations there.

Last month, Carter installed Army Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland to oversee operations in both Iraq and Syria, taking the place of three officers who had been responsible for different aspects of the military campaign in the two countries.

On the Syrian front, the *New York Times* last week carried a report based on leaks from senior Obama administration officials indicating that Secretary of State Kerry and others are pushing for the US to set up no-fly zones in Syria under the pretext of protecting the civilian population. According to the *Times*, Defense Secretary Carter and the Pentagon are resisting such a move, warning that it would involve a major deployment of US forces and could easily lead to a direct conflict with Russian jets that are carrying out intensive bombing of anti-Assad “rebel” forces in the north and west of the country.

US moves to step up its military intervention in Iraq and Syria are largely driven by concerns over the growing influence of Russia in both countries and throughout the Middle East. They follow Moscow’s decision at the end of September to begin bombing attacks on Islamist militias, including Al Qaeda-linked forces backed by the CIA, battling to overthrow Russia’s sole Arab ally in the Middle East, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Russia intervened to protect its sole military base outside the borders of the former Soviet Union, its air base at Tartus, and oil and gas pipeline routes critical to the oligarchs represented by the regime of President Vladimir Putin.

For the US, the war against ISIS has always been subordinated to its determination to oust Assad and install a puppet at the head of the Syrian government. This is deemed critical to American imperialism’s agenda of establishing US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

Nearly 25 years of US military aggression in the region, beginning with the first Gulf War in 1991, have produced a debacle for the United States. The Afghan puppet regime is besieged by the Taliban, causing Obama to reverse his pledge to remove all US troops by the end of this year; Libya has disintegrated following the US-led war to remove and murder Muammar Gaddafi; Washington has failed thus far to dislodge Assad; and the government it installed in Iraq is ever more openly aligned with Iran and tilting toward Russia.

The Iraqi ambassador to the US, Lukman Faily, recently told

CNN that the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad would welcome Russian efforts to “complement the fight we have against ISIS.” Prominent Shiite Iraqi leader Hakim al-Zamili told Reuters earlier this month, “In the upcoming few days or weeks, I think Iraq will be forced to ask Russia to launch air strikes, and that depends on their success with Syria.”

He added, “We are seeking to see Russia have a bigger role in Iraq. Yes, definitely a bigger role than the Americans.”

Also, on Friday, Russia announced an agreement with Jordan, a key US ally, to coordinate military operations in Syria.

The same day, the White House officially announced the departure of Gen. John R. Allen, appointed last year by Obama to be his point man in the war on ISIS. The retired Marine officer and former commander of the US-led coalition in Afghanistan will step down in mid-November and be replaced by Brett McGurk, his State Department deputy. Reporting the announcement, the *New York Times* noted matter-of-factly that there are differences between the Pentagon and the State Department on US policy in Syria.

Already existing divisions within the American state and foreign policy establishment have been sharply exacerbated by the Russian military intervention in Syria. Congressional Republicans, every Republican candidate for the 2016 presidential election, retired military and intelligence officials and a section of the Democratic leadership have denounced the Obama administration’s policy as insufficiently aggressive and demanded a major escalation directed against both Assad and Russia. Most are calling for the establishment of no-fly zones in Syria and some are demanding a major expansion of the US troop presence in the region.

These critics include former US commander in Iraq and ex-CIA Director David Petraeus and the editorial boards of publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*. Their number also includes the current front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who is calling for the creation of so-called “safety zones” in Syria.

On the other side, prominent political figures have recently gone into print to call on the administration to drop its demand for Assad’s removal and seek an accommodation with both him and Russian President Putin. These include former President Jimmy Carter, who published a column in the *New York Times* last week advocating a “five nation plan” to end the Syrian civil war that would involve both Russia and Iran in a transitional process to ease Assad out of power and install a mutually agreeable successor.

Henry Kissinger published a similar commentary earlier this month, headlined “A Path Out of the Middle East Collapse,” which calls for an accommodation with both Russia and Assad.

Friday’s meeting of US, Russian, Saudi and Turkish foreign ministers in Vienna ended without any agreement on the key issue of Assad’s future. Washington and Riyadh continue to insist that any settlement be predicated on an agreement that

Assad leave office, while Moscow, without ruling out Assad’s departure, refuses to make it a precondition.

Nevertheless, both Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described the discussions as positive and agreed to a further meeting, with a greater number of participants, to be held as early as this week. Russia, Iraq and the European Union are insisting that Iran be among the nations invited, but Kerry has for now ruled that out.

There are also signs that Moscow may be placing increased pressure on Assad to make an eventual exit. Last week, Assad was called to Moscow for intensive discussions, and since then Lavrov and other Russian officials have called for early parliamentary and presidential elections in Syria to be held next year.

Whatever the diplomatic maneuvers, however, American imperialism is not prepared to accept being dislodged from its preeminent position in the Middle East. Its militarist and criminal policy has produced a catastrophe for the peoples of the region, with hundreds of thousands if not millions killed, and many more millions turned into refugees, without securing the predatory aims behind Washington’s wars.

The lying pretexts used to justify the wars—the supposed war on terrorism, the threat of weapons of mass destruction, human rights, democracy—have all been thoroughly exposed and discredited. Today, Washington is openly allied with Al Qaeda’s branch in Syria, the al-Nusra Front, which the US State Department itself has designated as a foreign terrorist organization, in America’s war for regime-change against Assad.

Left to its own devices, the American ruling class will inevitably respond to its deepening crisis in the Middle East by doubling down on military violence and subversion, increasing the danger of a war with nuclear-armed Russia. All the more urgent is the development of an international movement of the working class against imperialist war and the capitalist system that gives rise to it.



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