

Pentagon preparing for new ground combat operations in Iraq and Syria

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The Pentagon is preparing a new escalation of US military operations in Iraq and Syria, including “direct action on the ground,” according to testimony Tuesday by Defense Secretary Ashton Carter.

“We won’t hold back from supporting capable partners in opportunistic attacks against ISIL [an acronym for Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS], or conducting such missions directly, whether by strikes from the air or direct action on the ground,” Carter told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

“We expect to intensify our air campaign, including with additional US and coalition aircraft, to target ISIL with a higher and heavier rate of strikes,” Carter added.

Referring to a raid conducted last week by US Special Forces troops and Kurdish militia to rescue hostages held by ISIS, Carter declared, “While our mission in Iraq is to train, advise, and assist our Iraqi partners, in situations such as that operation—where we have actionable intelligence and a capable partner force—we want to support our partners.”

The “actionable intelligence” in that case proved faulty, as none of the Kurdish hostages being sought were present at the site, and many of those “rescued” turned out to be ISIS members being held by the Islamist militia as suspected spies.

Carter implied that the US will not immediately seek to establish a no-fly zone in Syria, as demanded by many within the military/intelligence and political establishment, but confirmed that such a move was under consideration and, if implemented, would require some type of military occupation on the ground.

“We do not have a concept of operations for a no-fly zone that we’re prepared to recommend,” Carter told the committee. But he later said he would discuss possible no fly zone scenarios behind closed doors with interested senators, and that a no fly zone was “not off

the table.”

The Obama administration may authorize the new ground operations in both Iraq and Syria as early as this week, according to the *Washington Post*. The plans were developed by US military commanders over a period of months following a highly publicized visit by Obama to the Pentagon in July, according to the *Post*.

Among the operations proposed by the Pentagon are plans to embed US Special Forces teams with Syrian and Kurdish groups in northern Iraq and Syria in preparation for US-backed ground offensives in both areas. “The changes would represent a significant escalation of the American role in Iraq and Syria,” the *Post* noted.

Carter’s statements and the *Post* revelations constitute an unambiguous repudiation of the promises of the Obama administration that US troops would not participate in ground combat as part of Operation Inherent Resolve, the renewed US military intervention in Iraq authorized by the White House in June 2014.

In his remarks Tuesday, Secretary Carter made clear that the moves are being taken largely in response to the growing Russian intervention in the region. Carter denounced the Russian government for “doubling down on their longstanding relationship with [Syrian President] Assad,” and warned senators about the strengthening of Russian and Iranian influence over the US-installed Baghdad regime.

“I’d have to be candid,” Carter said, “[Iraqi Prime Minister] Abadi does not have complete sway over what happens in Iraq.”

For their part, the Armed Services Committee members from both parties expressed support for aggressive measures to build up Sunni and Kurdish forces as US proxies and bulwarks against an Iranian-Russian dominated Iraq.

In remarks that have been echoed across the US political establishment in recent weeks, Republican Senator Joni Ernst said the Kurdish Peshmerga militias “have been great allies to us” and represented the “only force on the ground that has any momentum.”

The praise lavished on Kurdish militias in the Senate chamber only underscored the immense crisis and deep contradictions plaguing the US intervention in the region. The Senate hearing was held on the same day that the government of Turkey, Washington’s NATO ally, acknowledged that it had launched strikes against US-backed Kurdish fighters in northern Syria.

The Kurdish groups struck by Turkey, including People Protection Units (YPG) forces, were “some of the most important allies within Syria of the American-led coalition,” according to the *New York Times*.

The Turkish strikes, which included attacks against two strategic towns along the Syrian-Turkish border, were intended to shape the military situation in preparation for the establishment of “safe zones” in northern Syria under the auspices of Turkish ground and air forces, according to comments by Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu on Tuesday.

“If the YPG moves to the west of the river Euphrates, we will hit it,” the Turkish prime minister said in a televised appearance.

Tuesday’s strikes reflected “a new determination by Turkey to expand military operations against the American-allied group,” the *Times* wrote.

In off-the-record conversations cited by the *Wall Street Journal*, unnamed Obama administration officials acknowledged that some portion of the at least 50 tons of military assistance airdropped by the US over northern Syria ended up in the hands of the YPG and other Kurdish groups that are effectively at war with the Turkish state.

“The deepening US cooperation with the YPG in Syria sets the stage for a military response from Turkey, which is worried that emboldened Kurdish leaders will step up their demands for an independent state in Kurdish dominated areas straddling parts of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran,” the *Journal* noted Tuesday.

Even amid reports Tuesday that Iran will attend US-Russian sponsored political talks over Syria, the staunchly anti-Iranian Gulf States are signaling their readiness to launch their own military incursions

against the Syrian government.

The Qatari foreign minister told CNN last week that Qatar could launch a military intervention in Syria, potentially in league with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, if this became necessary to “protect the Syrian people from the brutality of the regime.”

The fundamental factor driving the Middle East into ever deeper chaos and bloodletting is the continuing, ever more volcanic eruption of US militarism. Faced with the failure of its Middle East policy, Washington is responding with yet another military escalation. President Obama, sold to the American public as the candidate who would end the hated Iraq war, is now committing US troops to combat operations on an open-ended timeline, not just in Afghanistan, but also in Iraq and Syria.



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