

US mulls deploying Special Forces, attack helicopters as Iran joins Syria talks

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In what appears to be an increasingly desperate bid to salvage Washington's bloody four-year-old regime change operation in Syria, US officials have revealed plans for sending Special Forces troops into the embattled country, while deploying attack helicopters in neighboring Iraq.

These reports follow US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter's testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee Tuesday that the Pentagon would not "hold back" from providing ground support for "capable partners" in the two countries or "conducting such missions directly, whether by strikes from the air or direct action on the ground."

He added that the US military was preparing to deploy additional warplanes to the region in order to "intensify our air campaign."

Even as the Pentagon was unveiling proposals for military escalation, however, Washington agreed to invite Iran to a foreign ministers meeting in Vienna on the Syrian crisis, reversing its four-year-old position of excluding Tehran because of its support for the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The meeting, which is to begin today and continue into Friday, follows similar talks less than a week earlier between the US, Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Roughly a dozen foreign ministers are expected to participate in this week's round of talks, including ministers from France, the European Union, Egypt, Iraq, Qatar and Lebanon.

Iran has been invited under conditions in which it has announced an increase in its assistance to the Assad government, with the growing number of Iranian advisers on the ground in Syria being reflected in recent reports of casualties, including the deaths of two Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commanders.

US President Barack Obama phoned Saudi Arabia's King Salman Tuesday to discuss the Syria talks and presumably persuade the monarch to accept Iranian participation. The Saudi regime has vehemently opposed Iran being included in the talks, having cast the war in Syria as a Sunni sectarian crusade against the influence of predominantly Shia Iran.

As with the first round of talks between the four foreign ministers last week, the discussion is expected to turn on the fate of Syria's President Assad. Washington, France, Turkey and Saudi Arabia and the other reactionary Sunni oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf, which have armed and funded the Islamist militias battling the government in Syria, are all demanding that Assad be removed from power either immediately or within a limited "transition period." Russia and Iran, which have provided military support for Assad, have taken the position that it is for the Syrian people to choose their government and determine Assad's future.

Behind the fixation on the person of Assad is the determination of Washington and its allies to remove him and impose their own puppet in Damascus. Russia and Iran, on the other hand, are determined to keep in place a regime that is allied with their own interests. At stake in the conflict are the strategic positions of both sides as well as vital economic interests involving energy resources and pipeline routes.

Having failed in its initial bid to overthrow Assad by funding and arming, in collaboration with its regional allies, the Islamist militias, Washington seized upon the growth and expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as the pretext for escalating its military intervention in the region last year.

Russia's own intervention, begun at the end of last month, has rapidly eclipsed the US military operations

while beginning to reverse the situation on the ground, allowing significant advances for Syrian government troops against ISIS, the al Qaeda-affiliated al Nusra Front and similar jihadi Salafist militias, which Washington has tried to paint as “moderates.”

On Wednesday, Moscow announced that its air force had struck 118 targets over the previous 24 hours, a record number since it began its bombing campaign in Syria. For its part, the US and its so-called anti-ISIS coalition has been reporting less than four strikes a day since the beginning of this month.

The Pentagon has denied that the increasing fall-off in sorties over Syria has been driven by concern that US warplanes could come into conflict with Russian jets, insisting that it is merely a matter of the “ebb and flow of battle.”

It would appear, however, that it has mainly been a matter of ebb. The Pentagon reported a total of 115 air strikes for all of September, barely half the number conducted the month before and less than what Russia is now recording in a single day. The inescapable conclusion is that the US has no interest in destroying ISIS, hoping instead to use its fighters in prosecuting the war for regime change.

With the talks in Vienna, Washington aims to achieve what it has been unable win with its Islamist proxy forces on the battlefield in Syria. It hopes to exert sufficient pressure on the Russian and Iranian governments to bring to power a new “interim unity government” that would include elements like the Syrian National Coalition, a collection of pro-imperialist exiles and Western intelligence assets.

At the same time, however, the Obama administration is driven inexorably toward a dangerous escalation of its military intervention in the Middle East, in large measure because of the debacle created by its previous policies and the growing sense that Russia could succeed in its bid to keep its sole Middle Eastern ally in power.

A measure of the crisis of US policy in the region came Wednesday with a statement by the spokesman for Iraq’s Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi that Iraq did not request and does not welcome any “direct action on the ground” as proposed in Defense Secretary Carter’s Capitol Hill testimony the day before.

“This is an Iraqi affair and the government did not ask the US Department of Defense to be involved in

direct operations,” the spokesman, Sa’ad al-Haditha, told NBC News. “We have enough soldiers on the ground.”

Meanwhile Abadi is under growing pressure from within his own ruling coalition to request Russia to expand its air strikes into Iraq.

US plans for deploying Special Forces troops in Syria are equally problematic. The only reliable ground force that Washington has been able to come up with in fighting ISIS is the Syrian Kurdish militia, the People’s Defense Units, or YPG. The YPG and the Syrian Kurdish party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), have in turn been targeted by the government of Turkey, Washington’s NATO ally, which views them as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey.

A telling indication of Washington’s real motives and alignments and the way in which multiple crises in the Middle East threaten to coalesce into a regional and even global conflagration came Tuesday with a report by the Syrian army that Turkish, Qatari and Emirate aircraft had been used to ferry 500 ISIS fighters from Syria to the Yemeni port city of Aden.

The Islamist militants were reportedly then divided into three groups and sent into separate regions of Yemen to participate in the Saudi-led war against the Houthi rebels. The seven-month-old war, which is being fought with the aid of US weapons, intelligence and advisers, has counted on Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as a key anti-Houthi force.



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