US announces expeditionary force for combat in Syria

Niles Williamson, Thomas Gaist
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Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced Tuesday that the US plans to deploy a new contingent of Special Forces to Iraq to carry out military operations against ISIS targets throughout the country as well as across the border in Syria. The US ground force will include at least 200 commandos, according to an AFP report published late Tuesday.

Testifying before the House Armed Services Committee alongside Gen. Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Carter said a "specialized expeditionary targeting force" would be deployed to assist the Iraqi military and Kurdish Peshmerga forces in retaking territory from ISIS.

According to Carter, these soldiers will work with Iraqi and Kurdish forces to conduct raids, free hostages, gather intelligence and capture ISIS leaders throughout Iraq. They will also, Carter said, conduct "unilateral operations" in Syria. "We are at war," he told the assembled House of Representatives members.

Dunford told the committee that the new force would increase the effectiveness of military operations in Iraq and Syria and accelerate the collection of intelligence on ISIS operations. "We're fighting a campaign across Iraq and Syria so we're going to go where the enemy is, and we're going to conduct operations where they most effectively degrade the capabilities of the enemy," he stated.

Carter and Dunford's testimony set the stage for an open-ended escalation of ground operations in both Iraq and Syria. The expeditionary forces will be in addition to the 3,500 US troops already deployed to Iraq by the Obama administration and the scores of US commandos already carrying out operations in northern Syria.

The Pentagon chief's announcement completely shatters Obama's repeated pledges not to deploy "boots on the ground" in Syria.

In his testimony, Carter made clear that the initially limited troop deployment in Syria was only the beginning. "That's for starters," he told the committee. "If we find more forces that we can enable in this way, we're prepared to do more. I have every reason to believe the president will allow us to do more and authorize us to do more when we have more opportunities."

Dunford indicated that the number of regular US troops deployed to Iraq was likely to increase over the next several months. "I will not feel at all constrained in bringing forward recommendations for additional capabilities if that's what it takes to defeat the enemy," he said.

Neither Democratic nor Republican members of the committee opposed the announced escalation of US military operations in Syria. The Republicans demanded an even more aggressive policy and questioned whether the Obama administration had a coherent strategy for defeating ISIS.

Democratic representatives Tammy Duckworth and Joe Courtney demanded that Congress be given the opportunity to pass a new Authorization for Use of Military Force resolution in order to provide a legal fig leaf for the expanding military operations in Syria and Iraq and their possible extension into Libya.

Only one member of the committee, Democratic Representative Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii, raised concerns that the continued push to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad under the cover of fighting ISIS was drawing the US into a possible nuclear conflict with Russia, Assad's main military backer.

Earlier on Tuesday, at a press conference in Paris, where he was attending the global climate summit, Obama escalated Washington's confrontation with Moscow over the latter's intervention in Syria and support for Assad.

He reiterated the US position that the removal of Assad was a precondition for any political settlement in Syria

and effectively ruled out a "grand alliance" against ISIS that would include Russia, with the question of Assad's fate to be put on the back burner. In the aftermath of the terror attacks in Paris last month, French President Hollande, with support from Germany, had proposed such an alliance.

Turkey's November 24 shoot-down of a Russian jet, undoubtedly carried out with the foreknowledge and support of Washington and subsequently defended by Obama and NATO officials, had the intended effect of undermining any chance of forming such an alliance.

In his Paris press conference, Obama explicitly ruled it out. Instead, he seemed to backtrack from previous statements to the effect that the US would be willing to accept a transitional government in Syria that would include Assad for a period of some months, pending the installation of a new government that would exclude the current president.

On the issue of "whether Mr. Assad can continue to serve as president while still bringing the civil war to an end," Obama said, "[A]s a practical matter, it is impossible for Mr. Assad to bring that country together and to bring all the parties into an inclusive government."

There could be no agreement with Russia, Obama indicated, so long as it continued to back Assad and bomb anti-Assad forces, including al-Nusra and other groups aligned with Al Qaeda, that are supported by the United States and its regional allies.

"And so long as they are aligned with the regime," Obama said, "a lot of Russian resources are still going to be targeted at opposition groups that ultimately are going to end up being part of an inclusive government that we support."

At one point, Obama all but gloated over Russian losses linked to its intervention in Syria, including the downing of a Russian commercial plane over Egypt that killed all 224, mostly Russian, passengers and crew. He told the press: "Russia has lost a commercial passenger jet. You've seen another jet shot down. There have been losses in terms of Russian personnel. And I think Mr. Putin understands that, with Afghanistan fresh in the memory, for him to simply get bogged down in an inconclusive and paralyzing civil conflict is not the outcome that he's looking for."

Prior to the press conference, Obama had a one-on-one meeting with Turkish President Erdogan at which he reiterated US support for Turkey and defended its shoot-down of the Russian jet.

The US announcement of expanded ground operations in Iraq and Syria and Obama's provocative press briefing coincided with a NATO conference in Brussels at which plans for stepped-up NATO military operations in the region were discussed. NATO officials vowed to deploy new war planes and missile systems to the Turkish border, and Germany and Denmark pledged additional naval forces in support of NATO fleet operations near the Syrian coast.

Britain's Royal Air Force began dispatching Tornado war planes to the eastern Mediterranean Tuesday, even prior to Wednesday's official vote in Parliament on extending British air operations into Syria as proposed by Prime Minister Cameron.

Russia, for its part, is also escalating its military operations. It has begun deploying S-400 missile defense systems in support of its expeditionary presence in Syria's Latakia province.

Obama's so-called "war on ISIS" is, in fact, a cover for US imperialism's drive to remove Assad and establish a puppet regime in Syria, as part of its agenda of consolidating control over the entire region and its vast energy resources. ISIS is a creation of US imperialism, having originated in the US invasion and devastation of Iraq and Washington's subsequent wars for regime-change in Libya and Syria. The CIA and US regional allies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey provided arms and funds for ISIS and its predecessors in Libya and Syria and would have no problem working with them in future neo-colonial ventures.

In the meantime, Iraq, Libya and Syria have been virtually destroyed, over a million people have been killed and tens of millions turned into refugees, and Syria has become the focal point of a proxy war involving the US and the European imperialist powers, as well as Russia and Iran, in which the danger grows of a direct conflict between the US and Russia, the world's two biggest nuclear powers.

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