

Obama vows expanded war in Syria

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In brief remarks at the Pentagon Monday afternoon, President Barack Obama sought to counter his critics within the US political establishment by vowing to escalate the US bombing and military operations in Syria, nominally directed at the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Speaking before top military brass after meeting with his National Security Council, Obama adopted the language of a mafia hit-man. He boasted that in November, the US and its allies had dropped more bombs on ISIS targets than in any other month since the campaign began. He also listed by name various ISIS leaders whom the US had “taken out,” i.e., killed in targeted assassinations. He declared, “ISIL [ISIS] leaders cannot hide. And our next message to them is simple: You are next.”

If ISIS forces gather in any significant numbers, Obama vowed, “We’ll wipe them out.”

Obama also reported for the first time that Special Operations forces ordered into the region in late October were now active in Syria. Among those flanking Obama as he spoke was General Joseph Votel, head of the US Special Operations Command.

In an effort to justify mass casualties in the bombing of Syria, including an attack last week that killed 36 civilians (20 of them children), Obama made the standard claim that ISIS was “using defenseless men, women and children as human shields.”

Obama’s remarks follow the decisions earlier this month by the British Parliament and the German *Bundestag* to back their own countries’ participation in the air war in Syria. France intensified military operations last month, immediately after the Paris terrorist attacks.

The war in Syria now involves at least eight major powers, including Russia, whose interests are sharply divergent from those of Washington and its allies. US Secretary of State John Kerry is due to visit the

Kremlin today for a round of talks ostensibly aimed at reaching some sort of accommodation on a “political transition” to end the Syrian civil war.

The US and Russia have differed on the fate of the government of President Bashar al-Assad, which Russia counts as its major regional ally and which the US has insisted must go as a precondition for any agreement. The US and its allies have denounced Russia for targeting non-ISIS forces in Syria, principally Al Qaeda-linked groups such as the al-Nusra Front, which the US and the Gulf monarchies have been backing in the campaign against Assad.

According to a report by the Associated Press on Monday, “Assad’s future and his potential role in the political transition will be prime topics of Kerry’s conversation with Putin and [Russian Foreign Minister Sergei] Lavrov, according to US officials, who say the results of the meetings will determine whether or not a new international diplomatic conference on Syria will go ahead as planned at the United Nations on Friday.”

Obama’s remarks came just over a week after his nationally televised “address to the nation” following the December 2 attacks in San Bernardino, California. Along with the killings last month in Paris, the shootings in San Bernardino have been used as a pretext for intensifying military operations in Syria, with sections of the ruling establishment demanding much more aggressive action.

There are mounting charges that the White House lacks a credible strategy to deal with the expanding civil war, a war that has been stoked by unending military aggression led by US imperialism in the Middle East.

Republican House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy said Monday that “it’s obvious that the president’s current strategy isn’t working.” Other Republican leaders have called for the deployment of more troops, while the frontrunner for the Democratic presidential

nomination, Hillary Clinton, has proposed the creation of a “no-fly” zone in Syria that would require a massive military escalation.

Particularly significant was a commentary earlier this month by Anthony Cordesman, the leading strategist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) think tank, which has close ties to the military and intelligence apparatus. In “More Special Forces for Iraq and Syria: Tactical Asset or Strategic Tokenism,” Cordesman complained that the addition of Special Forces in Syria and Iraq will do little, “given the overall lack of a credible US strategy and plans to create effective Iraqi and Syrian forces.”

“There is a serious risk that they will become a political tool rather than effective forces,” Cordesman wrote, “and potentially a sacrifice pawn in a game that the Administration is not really playing to win.”

He pointed to the nexus of conflicting interests in the region and potential stumbling blocks for US imperialism—including the increasingly close relations between the Iraqi government and Iran—and worried that “no official statement or report has indicated that there is a credible plan or mix of US, Arab, and Turkish efforts, or that it can create a meaningful rebel force in Syria to deal with ISIS—or the Assad forces.” The administration, he declared, seemed intent on trying to “push the problem into his successor’s lap.”

The administration has sought to resist calls for what Obama, in his San Bernardino speech, referred to as a “long and costly ground war in Iraq and Syria.” At the same time, it has continually accommodated demands from the sections of the ruling class for tougher action. This led Thomas Sanderson, a director at CSIS, to note Monday that the president is “now imbued with reluctant enthusiasm.”

A central aim of the Obama administration, and the sections of the foreign policy and security establishment for which it principally speaks, has been to shift US military resources and attention to what it considers a greater challenge to US interests: China. This is the basis for the White House’s “pivot to Asia” and is a major factor in its reluctance to commit more forces to the Middle East.

In a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs* magazine (“Obama’s Way”), foreign policy reporter Fred Kaplan wrote that the “tragedy of Obama’s presidency” was that it “wanted to shift away from the stagnant

battlefields in and around the Middle East and devote more attention to the Asia-Pacific region, with its prospects for dynamic growth, trade, and, in the form of China, an expansionist power that needs to be at once contained militarily and lured into the global economy... He understood, and still does, that this is where the United States’ future interests [i.e., the interests of the American ruling class] lie.”

Divisions within the ruling class over policy are fueled by the deepening contradictions and crisis of American imperialism as a whole, which has the fundamental aim of controlling the entire world. In pursuit of this aim, the United States has been engaged in a quarter-century of war, centered in the Middle East and Central Asia, which has devastated entire societies, killed more than 1 million people, fostered the rise of ISIS and ignited a region-wide civil war.

This expanding war is now increasingly taking the form of a direct conflict with what the US considers its main regional competitors, including Russia in the Middle East and Eastern Europe and China in the Pacific.



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