

Obama responds to terror scare over San Bernardino attack

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President Obama held a year-end White House press conference Friday, his third nationally televised appearance in a week focused on the subject of terrorism and the campaign to exploit the San Bernardino attack to foment a wider US military intervention in Syria.

Speaking only hours before departing for San Bernardino for a closed-door meeting with the families of victims and survivors, he sought to deflect criticism of the administration's response to the attack and its overall policy in relation to the Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL) in Syria.

Obama claimed that attacking ISIS with air strikes and assassinations by Special Forces was shrinking the group's territory. "ISIL has already lost about 40 percent of the populated areas it once controlled in Iraq, and it's losing territory in Syria," he said. "As we keep up the pressure, our air campaign will continue to hit ISIL harder than ever—taking out their leaders, their commanders and their forces."

He rebutted claims by Republican critics that the Department of Homeland Security had overlooked social media postings expressing support for armed jihad by the perpetrators of the San Bernardino attack, Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik. Obama pointed out that these had been private communications, inaccessible to surveillance, and not public postings on Facebook.

He insisted that US intelligence agencies "are constantly monitoring public posts," adding that such surveillance "is part of the visa review process, that people are investigating what individuals have said publicly and [they are] questioned about any statements that they maybe made."

The US political establishment and the corporate-controlled media have seized on the December 3 attack

by Farook and Malik, which killed 14 people and wounded many more, singling it out from dozens of other bloody mass killings, some politically motivated, which take place on a regular basis in the United States.

The purpose of the propaganda campaign over San Bernardino is to shift the US political spectrum even further to the right and overcome popular opposition to an expanded US military intervention in the Middle East as well as even greater powers for the military-intelligence apparatus to spy on the American people and arrest and jail alleged terrorists and sympathizers.

The ruling elite also hopes that by creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation it can drown out the issues of unemployment, wage stagnation, inequality and the growth of poverty.

The campaign to convert San Bernardino into a pretext for war has brought to the surface sharp divisions within the US ruling elite over the direction of its foreign policy. Obama speaks for that section of the political establishment, including a section of the military-intelligence apparatus, which regards the 15 years of continuous warfare in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and now Syria as largely fruitless and seeks to shift the focus of US imperialist policy beyond the Middle East to looming confrontations with China and Russia.

The bulk of the Republican presidential field, as well as congressional Republicans, remain committed to the focus on the Middle East that characterized US foreign policy throughout the Bush administration and part of the Obama administration.

At Wednesday's presidential debate, the Republican candidates tried to exploit fears of terrorism for political advantage, each seeking to outdo the other in advocating military action against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. While divided over particular tactics—use of ground troops vs. air power, how much to rely on Sunni

Islamist allies such as Saudi Arabia, whether to foment conflict with Russian military forces deployed in Syria—their orientation is towards more aggressive US military intervention in the region.

In an unusually blunt but private discussion with a group of US newspaper columnists and editorial writers December 15, Obama spelled out his reasons for resisting calls for the dispatch of large American ground forces to Syria in the wake of San Bernardino. He evidently said the result of such an escalation, by Pentagon calculations, would be US casualties on the order of 100 soldiers killed and 500 wounded every month and a financial outlay of \$10 billion a month.

Obama was presenting these figures not out of any aversion to spilling blood, Syrian or American (indeed, the inevitable Syrian casualties are not even mentioned in press reports of the meeting with the columnists, and would likely dwarf the 250,000 who have already died in the four-year civil war). Rather, he was suggesting that intervention on the scale suggested by the Republicans would arouse widespread popular opposition that would hamper the operations of US imperialism all over the world.

One participant in the White House meeting was *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius, who has deep connections in military-intelligence circles (his father was secretary of the Navy during the Vietnam War). In a subsequent column, Ignatius posed the following question:

“What would cause Obama to change his mind and treat the war against the Islamic State as an existential crisis requiring a major US military intervention? Probably the trigger would be a big, orchestrated terrorist incident that so frightened the public that it began to prevent the normal functioning of America. At that point, Obama might decide there was no alternative to taking ownership of the Middle East mess with tens of thousands of US troops.”

There are longstanding ties between the US intelligence apparatus and the various Islamic fundamentalist movements in the Middle East. Al Qaeda arose out of the CIA campaign to recruit Islamist radicals to overthrow a Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan, while ISIS and other Islamists were mobilized first in Libya to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi, then shifted to Syria to attack the government of President Bashar al-Assad, the principal ally of

Russia and Iran in the region.

Given these connections, it is entirely possible for a section of the US military-intelligence apparatus to allow, arrange or actively organize whatever terrorist provocation is required to provide a pretext for a dramatic escalation of the US military intervention in Syria and the wider Middle East, along the lines suggested by Ignatius.

In other words, America is one terrorist attack away from all-out war in the Middle East, posing not only the slaughter of millions in that region, but raising the danger of a direct confrontation between the military forces of the United States and Russia, possessing the two largest arsenals of nuclear weapons.



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