

Hundreds of US Marines provide combat support as Iraqi forces advance toward Mosul

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Some 200 heavily armed US combat troops, members of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, provided artillery fire support for an Iraqi government offensive against the city of Mosul in northern Iraq on Thursday.

The US Marines unleashed artillery barrages against villages around Makhmour, a town south of Mosul, as part of “shaping operations” being carried out by thousands of Iraqi troops, under the direction of more than 100 US advisors.

The US forces operated from a newly established combat base in northern Iraq, known as Fire Base Bell, which was set up under complete secrecy, without so much as an official announcement by the Pentagon or White House.

According to the Pentagon, the US-backed assault, code-named “Operation Conquest,” will continue pummeling the outskirts of the northern Iraqi city for weeks or even months before Iraqi forces attempt a direct assault aimed at recapturing the city, which was home to some 2.5 million people before falling to ISIS in June 2014.

On Thursday, photos published by the *Washington Post* showed squadrons of Marines, laden with combat gear, boarding US transport aircraft prior to setting up the new US combat base in the north. The government photos referred to the Marines as members of a previously unreported “Task Force Spartan.”

The hundreds-strong Marine contingent brings the total number of US forces in Iraq to more than 5,000, well over the Obama White House’s official “cap” of 3,900.

The launch of new US combat missions in northern Iraq, waged by hundreds of US conventional forces, including infantry and artillery detachments, makes a mockery of the Obama administration’s assurances that US operations in Iraq would not involve ground

combat, and that it would be limited to advisory and aerial missions.

Far from a restrained intervention, the US military is determined to continue organizing and waging large-scale warfare in northern Iraq, without bothering to inform the public.

The Marine deployment is only the first in a number of further escalations of the US combat role planned by the Pentagon, including pending deployments of more US Special Operations forces and Apache helicopters in support of Iraqi troops, according to comments Wednesday by US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter.

In statements to CNN Thursday, Carter demanded that European governments “accelerate” their military interventions in the Middle East in response to the attacks in Brussels earlier this week. In addition to the stepped-up fire support on display Thursday, Iraqi forces require “lots of things” from the US, including more training, weaponry and other military hardware, Carter said.

The Brussels attacks have already been seized upon as the pretext for yet another round of punishing aerial bombardment against both Iraq and Syria. US war planes and drones launched strikes Thursday against alleged ISIS targets near the Iraqi cities of Hit, Kirkuk, Kisik, Mosul, Qayyarah, Ramadi, Sinjar, Sultan Abdullah and Tal Afar.

Heavy fighting continued to rage across Syria Thursday, as US-Russian negotiations in Geneva reached their officially scheduled conclusion. US air forces struck targets near the Syrian cities of Al Hawl, Manbij, Mar’a and Palmyra.

There remain significant divisions within the US establishment over the possibility of a limited political deal with Moscow aimed at establishing a postwar government under the supervision of a coalition of the

major powers.

While the current round of negotiations has proven essentially fruitless, another round of talks is scheduled to begin in April, and US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Russia on Thursday for discussions aimed at “getting down to brass tacks on what that political transition looks like,” according to comments by a State Department representative to media.

Russian President Vladimir Putin welcomed Kerry’s overtures, stressing his desire for compromise with US imperialism. “I really hope that your visit will allow us to bring our positions closer,” Putin said.

Late Thursday, Kerry announced that he and his Russian counterparts had “agreed on a target schedule for establishing a framework for a political transition and also a draft constitution.” The US and Russian diplomats agreed to work out proposals for a postwar government by August, Kerry said.

Even if a deal is reached, it will represent only a temporary and tactical compromise. The US ruling elite is pursuing a global agenda that is aimed at maintaining US domination over the Middle East, as part of Washington’s drive to control the entire Eurasian landmass and subordinate China, Russia and every other major powers to a US-led world order.

ISIS itself grew out of operations by the US military and intelligence agencies, which have directly trained leading ISIS officers in Georgia, Tajikistan and elsewhere. The US has fueled the growth of extremist militias across Africa and Asia both directly through provision of arms and funding, and indirectly through the laying waste of entire societies and unwavering support for the most reactionary regimes in the region.



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