US deploys B-52s for bombing in Syria, Iraq

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The US Air Force sent B-52 bombers to the Persian Gulf Saturday and plans to use them for bombing raids on targets in Iraq and Syria, according to the Pentagon and the US Central Command, which oversees US military operations in the Middle East. An undisclosed number of bombers will be stationed at Al Udeid air base in Qatar.

This marks the first deployment of B-52s in the Middle East since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when the huge planes delivered more than 40 percent of the bomb tonnage dropped on Iraqi military forces, incinerating hundreds of thousands of soldiers and destroying entrenched armored units.

The B-52 is the archetypal weapon for saturation bombing, used in Vietnam and the Gulf War in massed formations to rain thousands of bombs at a time on targets below. But US commanders claimed the newly deployed bombers would carry "smart" bombs and engage only in "precision" battlefield strikes in Syria and Iraq.

A spokesman for the Central Command, Lieutenant Colonel Chris Karns, told Reuters, "Accuracy is critically important in this war." He added, "Carpet-bombing would not be effective for the operation we're in because [ISIS] doesn't mass as large groups. Often they blend into population centers. We always look to minimize civilian casualties."

Contrary to these assurances, thousands of innocent civilians have already been killed since the US began air strikes on ISIS targets in Iraq in August 2014 and in Syria a month later. The only "restraint" on US operations has been the reluctance of the Obama administration to wipe out a force that has been one of the principal components of the "rebels" fighting the Assad regime in Syria.

Washington helped to create ISIS in the first place, arming and training radical Islamist fighters to overthrow Assad, many of them redeployed from the US-backed regime-change operation in Libya. It was only when ISIS forces crossed the border into Iraq and began to seize territory, particularly in June 2014, when they overran Mosul, Iraq's third-largest city, and threatened the US puppet regime in Baghdad, that Obama changed course and authorized the air campaign against them.

Press reports suggest that the B-52 deployment is a replacement for the unit of B-1 stealth bombers that conducted much of the bombing in Syria, but were withdrawn in February for maintenance and upgrading. Since then, official figures suggest a sharp drop in the number of US bombs dropped in the Iraq-Syria war, which has reached an eight-month low. The B-1s conducted only 7 percent of the missions against ISIS targets but dropped 40 percent of the bombs, according to General Charles Q. Brown, commander of the US Air Forces Central Command.

Like the B-1, and unlike smaller fighter-bombers, the B-52 has an extensive range that allows it to fly over a target area for up to 12 hours at a time before being forced to return to base for refueling. A single giant warplane weighs over 90 tons and can carry 35 tons of bombs in its payload.

The deployment of the B-52s is undoubtedly connected to US preparations to bolster the planned Iraqi military offensive against Mosul. Clearing operations have already begun against ISIS-held villages some 40 miles south and east of the city, although some of these efforts were abandoned when Iraqi troops panicked and ran, just as they did during the fall of Mosul nearly two years ago.

There are reportedly concerns that when the actual assault begins on Mosul, with Kurdish militia attacking from the north and Iraqi troops from the south, the encircled ISIS forces will seek to break out southward through the Iraqi lines, or even launch their own counteroffensive down the Tigris River in the direction

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of Baghdad. B-52 bombers would be particularly effective against any conventional massed movement of ISIS troops and armored vehicles.

The heavy bombers will also be used against targets within Syria. CNN reported Friday that Washington was considering deploying 250 additional Special Forces troops in Syria as part of a broader effort to ramp up military operations against ISIS. A major role of Special Forces is to collect targeting information for US air strikes.

The B-52s could have other uses, as General Brown indicated when he declared, “The B-52 demonstrates our continued resolve to apply persistent pressure on [ISIS] and defend the region in any future contingency.” The last phrase could well refer to Iran, since the whole country is within easy range of B-52s based in Qatar. So are the Caucasus, Ukraine and nearly all of European Russia. (Moscow itself is 2,200 miles from Doha, only one quarter of the 8,800-mile range of the B-52).

The report on the B-52s came one day after US Secretary of State John Kerry made an unannounced visit to Baghdad to meet with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi as well as Kurdish and Sunni opposition leaders. Kerry came straight from a meeting with Persian Gulf rulers in Bahrain, drawn by the deepening political crisis of the Baghdad regime.

These maneuvers and preparations for a wider war are taking place under a virtual media blackout in the United States. The television networks have generally ignored the escalating conflict in Iraq, and there was no discussion of the movement of the B-52s on any of the Sunday network interview programs, not even on Fox, where President Obama was the guest for the first time in his more than seven years in office.

Obama criticized Texas Senator Ted Cruz, one of the two leading Republican presidential hopefuls, for proposing to “carpet-bomb innocent civilians,” which Obama described as “not a productive approach to defeating terrorism.” His Fox interviewer, Chris Wallace, did not point out that Obama had just deployed to the Iraq-Syria war zone an undisclosed number of the planes infamously linked to carpet-bombing.

No questions were asked about the B-52s on the other network interview programs, where the two remaining Democratic presidential contenders, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, were interviewed at length.

The only discussion of the Middle East came on CNN’s “State of the Union” broadcast, where Clinton attacked Sanders for his suggestion that Israel had used “disproportionate” force in its devastating attack on Gaza in 2014, in which some 2,100 Palestinians were killed, including more than 500 women and children.

Sanders responded by reiterating his “100 percent support” for the state of Israel and its “right to defend itself” against Hamas fighters using homemade rockets that did little damage to targets within Israel.

Both Sanders and Clinton have embraced the Obama administration’s approach to the war in Iraq and Syria, backing the stepped-up bombing and the deployment of thousands of US ground combat troops in the guise of “advisers,” “trainers” and “Special Forces.”

They have fully participated in the bipartisan conspiracy of silence to exclude from the election campaign any discussion of advanced plans to escalate US military aggression, including preparations for war against China and Russia, until after the November vote.

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