

US military prepares new offensives in Syria and Iraq

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Even as tensions are rising with Russia in Eastern Europe and China in Asia, the United States has launched a new war in Libya and is preparing a major military escalation in the Middle East, nominally directed against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In an interview yesterday with *USA Today*, Air Force Lieutenant General Jeffrey Harrigan confirmed that the US-led coalition is planning coordinated offensives against two ISIS-held cities—Mosul in northern Iraq and Raqqa in Syria. “If we are able to do simultaneous operations and synchronise the Mosul piece and the Raqqa piece, think about the problem that generates for [ISIS],” he said.

Harrigan, who recently took over command of air operations in the Middle East, said coalition war planes had been striking targets in both cities in recent months. “The team is focussed on force generation to try and make that simultaneous operation occur, because we see huge benefits from it,” he said, referring to the build-up of anti-ISIS ground forces in Iraq and Syria.

USA Today reported US troops are already operating extensively inside Syria, stating: “US Special Operations Forces are helping to identify and organise Syrian rebel groups into a force that can take on the Islamic State [ISIS]. The force now numbers about 30,000 and had generated some surprisingly early successes, particularly around the northern city of Manbij.”

Within Iraq, US-led preparations have been underway for months to retake Mosul, the country’s second largest city, which still has a population of up to one million despite a mass exodus. Iraqi government forces last month seized the Qayyarah air base, 60 kilometres south of Mosul, which is being transformed into a major hub of operations for the upcoming offensive.

The US has funnelled in around 400 troops to carry

out repairs, as well as to provide military advice, logistics, communications and intelligence to Iraqi ground troops, which have already begun seizing villages and towns to the south of Mosul. The air base’s runways are being upgraded and extended to allow large military transports to land, along with US and Iraqi fighters and helicopter gunships.

The anti-ISIS forces preparing for the Mosul offensive consist of an unstable coalition of Kurdish peshmerga militia, regular Iraqi army troops and Shiite-dominated Popular Mobilisation Forces, which are notorious for their atrocities against Sunni civilians during the battle for Fallujah. Already concerns are being raised about the potential for sectarian fighting and human rights abuses once Mosul is recaptured.

Lieutenant General Sean MacFarland, the top US commander in Syria and Iraq, declared this week: “We are going to try to get Mosul back as fast as we can. It’s one million people living under an oppressive rule under terrible conditions... The Iraqi security forces around Qayyarah are in a position now to begin that process and we’ll try to hurry that along as fast as we possibly can but putting an exact time on it, I’d rather not.”

MacFarland, who is due to be replaced, declared the US was winning the war against ISIS, reducing their territory in Iraq by more than half. “Although it’s not a measure of success and it’s difficult to confirm, we estimate that over the past 11 months we’ve killed about 25,000 enemy figures.” He provided no estimate of the number of civilians killed in the fighting or in US air raids.

The general also downplayed the role of US military forces, declaring they were only playing an “advise and assist” role at a distance and in specific locations. It is clear, however, that US troops are increasingly

involved closer to the frontlines.

In an article late last month, the *Washington Post* reported: “While US Special Operations forces have already been advising elite counterterrorism troops and Kurdish peshmerga forces at their lower levels, the Qayyarah mission marks the first time since 2014 that US forces have advised Iraqi army battalions in the field.”

A small team of American combat engineers accompanied Iraqi forces on July 20 to advise on the task of constructing a temporary bridge over the Tigris River to the southeast of the town of Qayyarah. According to the *Post*, the US troops spent a few hours in the field in what was a “narrowly targeted mission, with limited battlefield exposure”—a model for “the restricted role that American commanders are planning for US ground forces in the Mosul operation.”

US generals are clearly concerned that American battlefield deaths will fuel anti-war sentiment at home, but have not ruled out putting US troops on the frontline. “In private, other senior officers are even more blunt, making reference to troops they lost in earlier Iraq deployments. This time, they will place Americans in the thick of fighting only if the overall mission is at risk,” the newspaper stated.

The timing of offensives in Iraq and Syria is also being driven by political considerations. Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party are increasingly attacking Republican nominee Donald Trump as being unfit to be commander-in-chief of US forces. A substantial military victory in the Middle East, no matter what the cost in Syrian and Iraqi lives, has the potential to boost Clinton.

The issue is clearly being discussed in Washington circles. An article on the *Politico* website on August 1, entitled “Get ready for Obama’s ‘October Surprise’ in Iraq,” suggested that “the American public could be treated to a major US-led military victory in Iraq this fall, just as voters are deciding who will be the nation’s next president.”

The article cited unnamed senior US officers who insisted the Mosul offensive’s timing was not bound up with politics, but it did not rule out the possibility. “If Mosul is retaken, it would both mark a political triumph for Barack Obama and likely benefit his party’s nominee at the polls, Hillary Clinton, undercutting Republican claims that the Obama

administration has failed to take the gloves off against Islamic State,” it noted.



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