

Mosul offensive intensifies regional tensions as Turkish soldiers intervene in Iraq

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Tensions between Turkey and Iraq heightened over the weekend as the Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga forces pushed towards the Islamic State-controlled city of Mosul.

US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter arrived in Ankara Friday, before traveling to Iraq for meetings in Baghdad Saturday and Irbil, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) capital yesterday. Carter announced after meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that he had secured an agreement in principle to permit Turkish troops stationed near Mosul to participate in the offensive.

But within 24 hours, the Iraqi government, which has previously vowed to attack Turkish troops if they become involved, rebuffed the deal. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared Iraqi forces would take Mosul without additional outside assistance. “I know that the Turks want to participate, we tell them thank you, this is something the Iraqis will handle and the Iraqis will liberate Mosul and the rest of the territories,” he said after talks with Carter.

Ignoring al-Abadi’s declaration, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim confirmed Sunday that tanks and artillery had provided support to Peshmerga fighters advancing on the Islamic State-held town of Bashiqa. The nearby base used by Turkish soldiers has been described by al-Abadi as an illegal occupation of Iraqi territory.

Erdogan, who spelt out in a speech last week Turkey’s regional ambitions throughout the Middle East and the Balkans, has made clear the Turkish troops have no intention of withdrawing. He insisted Turkey would be involved in Mosul, stating they “have a 350-km border and I am under threat from across that border. ... Turkey will take part in the Mosul operation and hold a seat at the table. It is out of the question for us to remain outside. Because there is history in Mosul for us.”

The dispute between the Iraqi and Turkish governments is only one of a vast array of regional and sectarian

divisions being inflamed by the US-backed offensive on the northern Iraqi city of 1.5 million people. Washington has forged alliances with mutually antagonistic state and non-state forces in the course of its joint interventions in Iraq and Syria, increasing the likelihood of the conflicts spiraling out of control and drawing in the major powers in a wider war.

Turkey also announced further attacks on the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) in northern Syria Sunday. While Carter attempted to smooth over frictions between Washington and Ankara during his stop in Turkey Friday, these latest attacks on the US-aligned Kurdish militias show how their interests are colliding.

They could also serve to deepen hostilities with Damascus, which threatened to shoot down Turkish planes carrying out air strikes on its territory. Such a development could easily be seized upon by the US and its NATO allies to justify a full-scale war in Syria on the basis that Turkey, a NATO member, had come under attack.

Such an intervention would pit NATO not only against Syria, but also nuclear-armed Russia, which is determined to prop up its sole ally in the Middle East by supporting the Assad regime.

Even within the supposed anti-ISIS coalition currently advancing on Mosul, there are substantial differences. A growing number of commentators acknowledge that the capture of Mosul will likely set off another wave of sectarian bloodletting as the competing religious-based militias seek to seize territory in the area. These forces include Shia militias organized in the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), which are nominally under the command of the Baghdad government but are in reality controlled by Iran, Sunni tribal forces, Turkish-trained Sunni fighters and the regular Iraqi army. One major fault line will be between the KRG and Baghdad, with the KRG foreign minister declaring last week that the

Peshmerga's participation in the offensive would have to be recognized by granting the KRG a role in the region around Mosul, which is rich in energy and in part contested between Irbil and Baghdad.

As it has done since the 2003 invasion, US imperialism will not hesitate to ruthlessly exploit these sectarian divisions in pursuit of its goals of maintaining a permanent military presence in energy-rich Iraq and extending its unchallenged dominance over the entire region.

This is demonstrated by growing reports that ISIS fighters are fleeing Mosul for Syria because the city has not been fully encircled. French President François Hollande acknowledged that fighters were traveling to Raqqa in comments he made at a diplomatic conference in Paris Thursday.

This explodes the "war on terror" fraud that has been employed by the US political and media establishment to justify one war after another over the past two decades. The reality is that Washington tolerated ISIS when it first emerged in Syria, seeing it as a useful force to fight for the overturn of the Assad regime. It was only when the group began making substantial gains in Iraq and threatened to destabilize the pro-US regime that Washington decided to intervene against it.

While assisting in the preparation of a humanitarian disaster in Mosul, Washington is continuing to recklessly escalate the Syrian conflict. After a UN report attributed a third chemical weapons attack to the Assad regime Friday, National Security Council spokesman Ned Price issued a belligerent statement in which the White House blamed Russia and Iran for war crimes and violations of international law. Vowing to hold those responsible to account, Price declared, "We strongly urge all UN member states and parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention, including Russia and Iran, which continue to conduct military operations on behalf of the Assad regime, to unequivocally support these efforts and sustain our shared commitment to the international standard against chemical weapons use." He continued, "Russian military and economic support to Syria enables the Assad regime to continue its military campaign against its own people, which it has done in violation of international law as demonstrated by the findings of this report."

US hypocrisy and double standards know no bounds. While denouncing Assad and his Russian backers for using chemical weapons and attacking Islamist militias in the east of Aleppo, the US and its allies are preparing a war crime of far greater proportions just a few hundred

miles further east.

With the aid of a pliant corporate media, which continues to pump out propaganda from imbedded reporters with the advancing Iraqi and Kurdish forces, the horrific scale of the humanitarian catastrophe being perpetrated by the US and its allied forces is largely being concealed from public view.

More than 5,600 have fled their homes since the advance began October 17. UNICEF's Iraq representative Peter Hawkins described the conditions in one refugee camp as "very, very poor" for children and added that supplies had been delivered by aid workers just to last one week.

The UN anticipates that 200,000 people will flee Mosul within the first four weeks of the US-backed offensive and that in a worst case scenario, this could rise to 1 million over the coming months. The agency noted that only 58 percent of its funding required to conduct emergency humanitarian aid has been donated, meaning that thousands of civilians will be left to die and many more to fend for themselves in miserable conditions. William Spindler, spokesman for the UN aid agency, said last week that the assault on Mosul "could produce a human catastrophe, resulting in one of the largest man-made displacement crises in recent years."

While media coverage of the threat to civilians focuses almost exclusively on ISIS's use of residents as human shields, the main threat comes from the US and allied-led air strikes carried out in support of the offensive and the wave of sectarian violence it is likely to trigger.

Responding to an ISIS attack on the city of Kirkuk Friday, in which 50 militants fought an hours-long battle with security forces, the US launched an air strike which incinerated at least 15 women at a Shia shrine and injured many more civilians.

Both the PMU, which played a prominent role in the recapturing of other cities from ISIS including Ramadi, and the Kurdish Peshmerga have been accused of war crimes. The Peshmerga was accused of ethnically cleansing Sunni villages retaken from ISIS last year and the PMU has also engaged in anti-Sunni reprisals such as abductions, torture and killings, according to Amnesty International.



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