

# Pentagon prepares for bigger, bloodier war in Iraq and Syria

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The Pentagon has prepared recommendations to be submitted to President Donald Trump at the beginning of next week for a major escalation of the US military intervention in Iraq and Syria.

According to unnamed US officials cited Friday by the *Wall Street Journal*, the proposal is expected to include “sending additional troops to Iraq and Syria” and “loosening battlefield restrictions” to “ease rules designed to minimize civilian casualties.”

The new battle plans stem from an executive order signed by Trump on January 28 giving the Pentagon 30 days to deliver a “preliminary draft of the Plan to defeat ISIS [Islamic State] in Iraq and Syria.”

According to independent estimates, as many as 8,000 civilians have already died in air strikes carried out by US and allied warplanes against targets in both Syria and Iraq, even as the Pentagon routinely denies the vast majority of reported deaths of unarmed men, women and children resulting from US bombings. The new policy to be rolled out next week, which the *Journal* reports is aimed at “increasing the number and rate of operations,” will inevitably entail a horrific intensification of this bloodletting.

Speaking before the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence at the Brookings Institution in Washington on Thursday, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine General Joseph Dunford, said that the Pentagon would be presenting Trump with a “political-military plan” to deal not only with ISIS in Iraq and Syria, but to “advance our long-term interests in the region.”

Referring to the intense contradictions besetting the US intervention in the region, which has relied on the use of Kurdish militias as proxy ground troops in Syria, even as Washington’s NATO ally, Turkey, has intervened to militarily counter their influence, Dunford

insisted that Washington “can’t be paralyzed by tough choices.”

Pointing to the regional scope of the planned US military escalation, Dunford echoed earlier bellicose rhetoric from the administration against Iran, listing it alongside Russia, China, North Korea and “transnational violent extremism” as the major targets of the US military.

The US military commander stated that “the major export of Iran is actually malign influence across the region.” He said that the US military buildup against Iran was designed to “make sure we have freedom of navigation through the Straits of Hormuz, and that we deter conflict and crisis in the region, and that we advance our interest to include our interest in dealing with violent extremism of all forms.” All of these alleged aims are pretexts for continuous US provocations aimed at countering Iran’s regional influence and furthering the drive for US hegemony in the Middle East.

In relation to Iraq, Dunford signaled US intentions to maintain a US military occupation long after the campaign against ISIS is completed. He referred to a “dialog about a long-term commitment to grow the capacity, maintain the capacity of the Iraqi security forces,” adding that Iraq’s Prime Minister Haider Abadi had spoken of “the international community continuing to support defense capacity building.”

Dunford’s comments echoed those of Secretary of Defense James “Mad Dog” Mattis during a trip earlier this week to Baghdad. While disavowing Trump’s crude comments last month—“We’re not in Iraq to seize anybody’s oil,” Mattis said—he also suggested that plans are being developed for a permanent US military presence in the country.

“The Iraqi people, the Iraqi military and the Iraqi

political leadership recognizes what they're up against and the value of the coalition and the partnership in particular with the United States," Mattis told reporters Monday. "I imagine we'll be in this fight for a while and we'll stand by each other."

Currently, Washington has more than 5,000 US troops in Iraq and another 500 Special Forces troops operating inside Syria. These forces are backed by tens of thousands of military contractors as well as other military units that are rotated in and out of the region. The plan to be presented next week will likely involve the deployment of thousands more US combat forces.

Trump has repeatedly indicated his support for establishing "safe zones" in Syria, an intervention that would require large numbers of US soldiers backed by air power to seize and control swathes of Syrian territory. It would also entail threats of military confrontation with Russian warplanes operating in support of the Syrian government.

As the Pentagon prepares its plans for military escalation in the region, US ground forces have reportedly entered Mosul, operating on the front lines with Iraqi forces in the bloody offensive to retake Iraq's second-largest city from ISIS. American Special Forces "advisers" joined Iraqi troops Thursday in the first incursion into western Mosul, with the retaking of the Mosul International Airport as well as a nearby military base. The operation was conducted with close air support from US warplanes.

The airport and the base, located in the southern part of western Mosul, are to be used as the launching pad for a major assault into the most densely populated area of the city, where an estimated three quarters of a million civilians are trapped with no means of escape.

The International Rescue Committee warned that this stage of the offensive would represent the "most dangerous phase" for civilians.

"This will be a terrifying moment for the 750,000 people still in the west of the city, and there is a real danger that the battle will be raging around them for weeks and possibly months to come," said Jason Kajer, the Iraq acting country director for the humanitarian group.

Referring to the increasingly desperate plight of civilians in western Mosul, the International Committee of the Red Cross's field coordinator in Erbil, Dany Merhy, said: "Supply routes have been cut from that

side of the city and people have been facing shortages of food, water, fuel and medicine. We can only imagine the state people will be in."

As in previous US-backed offensives against Fallujah and Ramadi, Mosul faces the prospect of being reduced to rubble. It is in this city where the proposed changes in the "rules of engagement" will find their first expression in the elevated slaughter of Iraqi civilians.



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