

Russia charges Pentagon with training ex-ISIS fighters

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US special operations troops are secretly harboring and training former fighters of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) at the remote American base in Al Tanf, Syria near the strategic nexus of the country's borders with Iraq and Jordan, according to a report issued by the Russian military command.

The charge was made Wednesday by General of the Army Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian military's general staff and deputy defense minister. He said that Russian drones and satellites had detected brigades of ISIS militants in and around both Al Tanf and another US military base near the Kurdish-controlled city of Al-Shaddadi in the country's northeast.

"They are in reality being trained there," Gerasimov said in an interview with the Russian daily *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. "They are practically Islamic State," he added. "But after they are worked with, they change their spots and take on another name. Their task is to destabilize the situation." The Islamist fighters, he indicated, are being re-branded as the "New Syrian Army."

According to the estimates of the Russian general staff, there are some 750 of the militants at the Shaddadi base, and roughly another 350 in Al-Tanf.

There was no immediate response from the Pentagon, which in the past has routinely denied charges of US collaboration with ISIS. In the waning days of the brutal US siege of the Syrian city of Raqqa, the so-called capital of ISIS, however, incontrovertible evidence emerged that Washington and its proxy ground force, the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, intervened to rescue and relocate ISIS fighters trapped in the city.

The BBC documented the fact that the Pentagon and its Syrian Kurdish proxies organized a four-mile-long convoy to evacuate thousands of ISIS fighters, along with tons of weapons, ammunition and explosives from Raqqa last October.

The report was confirmed by the former official spokesman of the Syrian Democratic Forces, Talal Silo, who defected to Turkey in October. He told the media that some

4,000 people were driven out of the city, all but about 500 of them armed ISIS fighters.

Silo also charged that the same kind of operation had been carried out during the earlier sieges of Manbij in northern Aleppo province and Al Tabqah on the Euphrates River, where thousands of other ISIS fighters had been allowed to leave with their weapons and ammunition.

The American strategy was not, as repeatedly proclaimed by top US officials, to "annihilate" ISIS, but rather to turn it against Syrian army troops in order to prevent the government from reclaiming strategic territory, including the oil fields of Deir Ezzor province and the eastern border with Iraq, where Washington is attempting to carve out a zone of control.

The charges from Russia are entirely consistent with these earlier reports and serve as another damning exposure of the so-called "war on terrorism" that has been invoked as the rationale for US imperialism's current intervention in Iraq and Syria, as well as its earlier wars in the region.

ISIS was itself a byproduct of Washington's interventions in the Middle East, serving as both an instrument of and a pretext for American military aggression aimed at asserting US imperialist dominance over the oil-rich region.

The report of US forces training the ex-ISIS militants for deployment as a new anti-government militia in Syria constitutes one more indication that Washington is preparing a new and far more dangerous phase of its military intervention in the war-ravaged country.

In one sense, US strategy is coming full circle back to where it started, with the CIA's fomenting of a war for regime change through the arming, funding and training of Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias directed at toppling the government of President Bashar al-Assad and installing a more pliant US puppet regime.

These militias, however, were routed, thanks to not only the military support given by Russia and Iran to Assad's forces, but also the overwhelming popular rejection of the socially and politically reactionary Islamist elements backed by Washington, the other Western powers, as well as Saudi

Arabia and the other Gulf oil sheikdoms, Turkey and Israel.

The attempt to launch a war for regime change 2.0 is conceivable only on the basis of a far more direct and massive US military intervention in the country.

The governments of both Iraq and Syria have declared victory in the campaign against ISIS. The Pentagon itself told the Reuters news agency Wednesday that fewer than 1,000 ISIS fighters remained in both countries.

The US military refused to respond to a question from Reuters on whether some ISIS fighters could have escaped to other countries, saying that it would not “engage in public speculation.” In reality, the US military and intelligence apparatus knows full well where these fighters are and is reorganizing and retraining them.

Despite this supposed victory in the war on ISIS, Washington has given no indication that it intends to reduce its troop levels in either Iraq or Syria.

Russia, meanwhile, has announced the renewal of its agreements with the Syrian government on what it terms “permanent deployment bases” at the Mediterranean port of Tartus and at the airfield and command-and-control center in Hmeymim. Moscow has indicated that it intends to expand its Tartus naval base to accommodate a fleet of 11 warships, including nuclear-powered vessels and missile-armed destroyers.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Wednesday that with the defeat of ISIS, “the main anti-terrorist objective” was now the eradication of the Al Nusra Front, the Islamist militia formed as the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda. With its main forces now concentrated in northwestern Idlib province, Al Nusra operates in close alliance with the so-called rebels armed and funded by the CIA and Washington’s regional allies, and has been the principal beneficiary of the vast quantities of arms they have funneled into the country.

The shift toward a “post-ISIS” strategy in Syria places US imperialism ever more directly on a collision course with both Iran and Russia. From the beginning, Washington’s strategic objective, masked by the “war on terror” pretext, has been to exert military force as a means of countering Russian and Iranian influence, which it views as the principal obstacle to the assertion of US hegemony in the region.

The increasing threat of a direct military confrontation between the world’s two largest nuclear powers has been underscored by recent reports from both Washington and Moscow of alleged close encounters and provocative confrontations between US and Russian warplanes in the skies over Syria’s Euphrates River valley.

At the same time, the Trump administration has elaborated a vociferously anti-Iranian policy based on the forging of an

alliance between the US, Saudi Arabia and its fellow Sunni oil monarchies and Israel. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly charged Tehran with carrying out “acts of war” based on unsubstantiated allegations of Iran arming Yemen’s Houthi rebels with missiles fired at the kingdom. For its part, Israel has warned that it will intervene militarily to prevent the creation of Iranian bases in Syria.

As US imperialism moves toward another escalation in Syria, with the threat of it mushrooming into a regional and even global war, the victims of the so-called anti-ISIS campaign continue to mount. Hundreds of thousands of refugees who were forced to flee and saw their homes bombed into rubble in both the Iraqi city of Mosul and the Syrian city of Raqqa are now facing near freezing cold along with the lack of adequate food and medical care, leading to new deaths.

A report last week by the Associated Press, based on data collected by the morgues and grave diggers of Mosul, indicated that the known toll in civilian lives resulting from the US “liberation” of the Iraqi city last July is approximately 11,000. This figure—10 times the civilian death toll acknowledged by the Pentagon—does not include many bodies still buried under the rubble.

Last July, Patrick Cockburn, the veteran Middle East correspondent of the British *Independent*, reported that Iraq’s former foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari had been informed by the intelligence service of Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government that the real death toll in Mosul was over 40,000.

That figure, like the latest reports of US protection and training for former ISIS fighters, was largely blacked out by the US corporate media, which faithfully covers up Washington’s war crimes.



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