

Top US military officials visit Middle East to ratchet up conflicts with Iran and Russia

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US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin arrived in Baghdad Tuesday for an official visit that amounted to a return to the scene of one of the greatest crimes carried out by US imperialism. The visit came on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq, an act of unprovoked aggression launched on the basis of lies about “weapons of mass destruction.” The war and occupation that followed claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and laid to waste what had been one of the most advanced societies in the Middle East.

Austin, a retired US Army general, was the last commander of US troops in Iraq before their announced withdrawal in 2011 following eight years of bloody occupation. The US military intervened again, however, in 2014, on the pretext of combating ISIS, killing thousands more and decimating major cities such as Mosul. This Islamist militia was Washington’s own Frankenstein’s monster, the product of the massive amounts of money, weapons and “foreign fighters” poured into Syria in the CIA-orchestrated regime-change war against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Today, the Pentagon reports the continuing deployment of 2,500 US troops in Iraq and another 900 in Syria, not counting large numbers of military contractors and special operations units rotated in and out of the region.

Austin’s tour includes not only Iraq, but also Jordan, Israel and Egypt. It comes on the heels of the unannounced visit of the commander of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, to the region last weekend. Milley made a lightning secret trip into Syria, visiting US troops who are occupying the main Syrian oil and gas fields. Deployed on the pretext of assuring an “enduring” defeat of ISIS, their real purpose is to deny critically needed resources to the war-ravaged country, which has been starved by unilateral US sanctions and now confronts the further catastrophe of last month’s earthquake.

The US troops are also there to counter the influence of Iran and Russia.

The Syrian government denounced Milley’s visit as “an illegal visit to an illegal US military base,” calling it a “flagrant violation by the US military official of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria.” Damascus dismissed Milley’s talk of a continuing battle against ISIS, declaring the Islamist militia “an illegitimate offspring of US intelligence” and

charging Washington with deliberately fostering terrorism and separatist militias for the purpose of dismembering Syria.

In addition to its bases in Syria’s northeastern oil and gas fields, the Pentagon maintains a base in Al Tanf in the country’s south, straddling the strategically important Baghdad-Damascus highway. Syria has charged that the base is being used to provide military training to Islamist fighters, some of whom are being prepared to fight against the Assad government, while others have allegedly been sent to fight alongside Ukrainian forces against Russia.

Milley’s visit also provoked a reaction in Ankara, with the Turkish foreign ministry summoning the US ambassador to demand an explanation. Turkey regards Washington’s main proxy force in the region, the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, as a “terrorist” group and an extension of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), against which the Turkish government has waged bloody repressive operations since the 1980s.

The main purpose of Milley’s visit was to signal that the Biden administration plans to continue the occupation of Syria, a gross violation of international law, indefinitely. Milley squeezed in a side visit to Israel, where he solidarized himself with the Israeli military and the far-right regime headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Early on Tuesday, just days after Milley’s talks with the Israeli high command, the Israel Defense Forces launched a missile attack from the Mediterranean, striking the airport in Aleppo that has served as the main conduit for international relief supplies for the victims of February’s earthquake. Syrian officials reported that the strike had left the airport’s runway unusable and that relief flights have been diverted. Syria’s foreign minister denounced the strike as “a double crime that once again reflects barbarism and inhumanity.” The earthquake has killed at least 6,000 people in Syria, left millions homeless and caused an estimated \$5 billion in direct physical damage.

Last month, in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, Israel targeted a residential block in Damascus, killing five people and injuring 15 civilians. In recent years, Israel, with the US providing support and military intelligence, has carried out hundreds of strikes on allegedly Iranian-linked targets inside Syria, many of them directed at civilian infrastructure. Iran is a principal ally of the government in Damascus and a number of

Iranian-backed militias joined government troops in fighting the Al Qaeda-linked militias employed as proxies in Washington's war for regime change.

Speaking in Baghdad Wednesday after meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani, Austin announced that US military forces would remain in Iraq, claiming that they are "focused on the mission of defeating Daesh [ISIS], and we are here for no other purpose." He claimed that US troops in the country were limited to "a non-combat advise, assist and enable role."

As in Syria, the US deployment in Iraq is directed first and foremost at countering the extensive influence of Iran in the country. Austin's statement to the media was notable for the absence of any mention of Iran, while Prime Minister al-Sudani issued a statement after their meeting stressing his government's interest in maintaining "balanced relations" with regional and international powers. Since the US invasion and the downfall of the government of Saddam Hussein, a succession of Iraqi regimes have sought to balance between US imperialism and Iran. In 2020, pro-Iranian parties led the Iraqi parliament in passing a resolution calling for the expulsion of US and allied troops from the country. Successive governments have failed to act upon it.

In advance of Austin's tour, the Pentagon released a statement saying that it would deal centrally with the "full constellation of Iran-associated threats," including "the risks to regional security resulting from increased military cooperation between Iran and Russia, which is now using weapons provided by Iran to kill Ukrainian civilians."

Austin's Mideast tour was designed to "reaffirm that we're the most capable combat-credible military in the world, and we can walk and chew gum at the same time," a senior US defense official told the *Financial Times* of London. In other words, US imperialism is signaling that despite its vast expenditures on the proxy war that it and NATO are waging against Russia in Ukraine and the increasing buildup toward a military confrontation with China, it can still continue the murderous interventions it has waged for hegemony over the Middle East over the course of the last three decades.

In a press conference given on his plane en route to the Middle East, Austin touted the Pentagon's continued deployment of 34,000 troops in the region, along with a naval fleet and major Air Force assets. "We've demonstrated over and over again that we can rapidly surge capability to any part of the globe that we need to, but especially here in the Middle East because we've operated here for, you know, 20-plus years," he added.

While the Pentagon has issued no itinerary for Austin's tour, he is expected to visit both Israel and Egypt. His first stop was Jordan, where he met with King Abdullah II.

While Pentagon briefers claimed that Austin would raise concern about rising violence in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, where troops aided and abetted fascistic Zionist settlers

in carrying out a pogrom against the Palestinian village of Hawara, the main focus of his talks with the ultra-right government of Netanyahu will be Iran.

Having sabotaged any attempt to revive the JCPOA Iran nuclear accord that the Trump administration unilaterally abrogated in 2018, Washington has increasingly threatened the use of force to stop Tehran from gaining a nuclear weapon, something that the Iranian government has consistently insisted it has no intention of doing.

Asked on his plane trip about the alleged threat of an Iranian bomb, Austin replied that "if things evolve, we need to take action to prevent that from happening, then, you know, my job as Secretary of Defense is to make sure that I'm providing the President with the right options."

Meanwhile, on Sunday, Netanyahu denounced a statement by International Atomic Energy Agency chairman Rafael Grossi that "any military attack on nuclear facilities is outlawed."

"Outside what law?" Netanyahu asked. "Is it permissible for Iran, which openly calls for our destruction, to organize the tools of slaughter for our destruction? Are we forbidden from defending ourselves? We are obviously permitted to do this."

In other words, Israel, wracked by the greatest political crisis and divisions in its history, is prepared to launch a "preventive" war on much the same basis as the war over "weapons of mass destruction" waged by Washington two decades ago.

The back-to-back Middle East trips by Milley and Austin, in addition to raising the specter of yet another US war in the region, provide a damning exposure of the hypocrisy of Washington's claims to be supporting a war for "democracy," "human rights" and "territorial integrity" in Ukraine.

Its principal allies consist of Israel, which has seized territory from all of its neighbors and enforces a system of apartheid oppression against the Palestinian population; Egypt, where the regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi rules by means of police state repression and keeps some 60,000 political prisoners behind bars; and Jordan, ruled by a hereditary monarchy. Meanwhile Washington continues to ride roughshod over the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria, not to mention the human rights of a population reduced to poverty and hunger by US-orchestrated war and the draconian US sanctions regime.



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