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The beheading of Japanese hostage Kenji Goto

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The execution of Japanese journalist Kenji Goto, as conveyed in a video released late Saturday night, is the latest atrocity to be carried out by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). It follows the beheading of another Japanese citizen, Haruna Yukawa, last week after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe refused to pay a \$200 million ransom for the two hostages.

The callous slaying of Goto and Yukawa, despite the appeals of their families and friends, once again exposes the reactionary character of Islamist organisations like ISIS and Al Qaeda. Far from being engaged in an anti-imperialist struggle, they represent dissident sections of the Arab bourgeoisie that are seeking to refashion relations with the major powers. Their methods of terrorist attack and execution of innocent civilians play directly into the hands of imperialism.

The killing of Goto immediately provoked a chorus of condemnation from the US and its allies, which have cynically seized on the executions as another justification for the renewed war in the Middle East. Washington, above all, is responsible for the creation of ISIS, which was spawned by the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and then financed and armed by America's Middle Eastern proxies as part of the Syrian civil war to oust President Bashar al-Assad.

The Japanese government will undoubtedly seek to exploit public shock and revulsion over the execution of the two hostages to accelerate its drive to remilitarise Japan and to aggressively

assert its imperialist interests abroad. In a broadcast yesterday, Abe denounced the “despicable terrorist act,” then declared that Japan would “resolutely fulfil its responsibility to the international community in the fight against terrorism” and warned it would “make the terrorists pay the price.”

Abe claimed that his government had done everything possible to secure Goto’s release. There is no evidence, however, that Tokyo took any such steps in the months following ISIS’s capture of Yukawa last August and Goto in October. It was Abe’s trip to the Middle East in January and his announcement of \$200 million in non-military aid to countries fighting ISIS that triggered the threats to kill the two hostages. Only in the wake of Yukawa’s execution did Japan attempt to work with Jordan to meet ISIS’s new demand for the release of a female Jordanian prisoner in exchange for Goto.

The Abe government has signalled that it will use the deaths to further undermine constitutional restrictions on Japanese military operations abroad. Reuters reported last week that top officials had drawn up a briefing paper for the government on the feasibility and legality of carrying out a military rescue operation.

However, mounting a commando-style rescue operation would go beyond legislation being prepared for the current parliamentary session to implement a so-called constitutional reinterpretation on “collective self-defence,” announced last year. These proposed laws will allow the Japanese military to play a far more direct role in US-led wars, in particular in the build-up for war against China as part of the US “pivot to Asia.” Going further by authorising military rescue operations would provide a pretext for unilateral Japanese intervention in any part of the globe.

The Japanese SDF has maintained an overseas military base in Djibouti in the horn of Africa since 2011—its first such base since the end of World War II. Originally justified on the basis of combating piracy, nearly 1,000 military personnel there are now engaged in various activities, including as part of UN operations in nearby South Sudan. Increasingly, Japan regards the base as a permanent staging point to defend its interests in the Middle East and Africa, the source of most of its energy imports.

If Abe has not acted more assertively during the hostage crisis, it reflects concern that a public backlash could undermine his militarist agenda. A small silent protest outside the prime minister’s office yesterday reflected broader sentiment that the government’s aggressive foreign policy was responsible for the deaths of Goto and Yukawa. Among the placards were those reading “No War” and “Don’t let Abe also kill me.”

The Japanese government intends to press ahead with its legislation on “collective defence” by April, despite widespread public opposition to the laws and Abe’s broader agenda of remilitarisation under the banner of “proactive pacifism.” Since coming to office in December 2012, Abe has expanded the military budget every year, established a US-style National Security Committee, re-focussed Japanese strategic planning on a war with China and launched a propaganda campaign designed to whitewash the Japanese military’s crimes in the 1930s and

1940s—all with Washington’s encouragement. At the same time, the new legislation will impose tougher security measures at home and tighter restrictions on protest and dissent.

While it is currently proceeding under the umbrella of Japan’s post-World War II alliance with the United States, the Abe government is determined to prosecute the interests of Japanese imperialism, even if that ultimately brings the US and Japan into conflict. Abe’s trip to the Middle East last month is part of a broader diplomatic offensive that has involved more overseas visits than any of his post-war predecessors. His plans for remilitarisation seek to ensure that Japan’s “soft power” is backed by military might.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War, the Japanese ruling class has been increasingly frustrated by the constitutional constraints on its military. During the first Gulf War, Japan was not only forced to sit on the sidelines, but pressured to pay for US military operations against Iraq. Over the past two decades, successive governments have incrementally undermined the post-war constitution, initially to pave the way for Japanese involvement in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, but only in non-combat roles.

The dramatic acceleration of Japanese remilitarisation under Abe is a reflection of the worsening economic breakdown and rising geo-political tensions in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. All the imperialist powers are seeking to offload the burden of the economic crisis onto their rivals, accelerating the slide to conflict and a new inter-imperialist conflagration.