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Washington to escalate US Mideast wars

By Bill Van Auken

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The Obama White House has given the green light to demands by the US military for an escalation of the ongoing intervention in Iraq and Syria, as well as the opening up of a new theater of war in the oil-rich North African nation of Libya, according to published reports.

Citing a senior administration official, the *New York Times* reported Friday that President Barack Obama is “willing to consider raising the stakes in both Iraq and Syria” by deploying hundreds more US troops to the war-torn countries.

Describing Obama as having earlier “resented” Pentagon pressure for military escalation, the *Times* report indicated that the US president is now bowing to the military brass for the deployment of substantially more troops.

The plan reportedly involves sending some 800 more US soldiers to join the roughly 3,700 already deployed in Iraq, along with US special forces units operating inside Syria.

The *Times* noted that both “the White House and the Pentagon have taken pains to avoid describing the deployment as combat troops, instead calling them special operators, trainers and advisers.” These terms of art are designed to obscure for the American public the reality that US imperialism is once again embarking upon a major new war of aggression in the Middle East.

According to the *Times*, top US commanders have pitched the latest escalation as a matter of building on supposed successes in the military campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), arguing that these could be expanded to the extent that Iraqi forces are “coached and trained by Americans.”

They have pointed in particular to the recent “liberation of Ramadi,” insisting that it can be followed by “liberating” both Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, and Raqqa in Syria, the nominal capital of the ISIS-occupied territory.

Ramadi was re-taken last month by an elite US-trained counterterrorism unit of the Iraqi army after protracted and devastating US airstrikes. Estimates are that over 60 percent of the city was reduced to rubble, leaving it virtually uninhabitable for the roughly half million people who previously called it home.

It is by no means clear how such an operation can be repeated in Mosul, a much larger city with a population of over one million, unless the Pentagon’s plans are to level it as well. The counterterrorism unit is too small for the job, and larger regular Iraqi army units have proven unreliable.

The logic of the US objectives in Iraq is an ever greater escalation of American forces leading to a reprise of the kind of war and occupation that was launched in 2003.

Meanwhile, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that President Obama convened a meeting of his national security advisers at the White House on Thursday to discuss the expansion of the US campaign against ISIS into Libya.

The White House issued a statement late Thursday stating, “The president emphasized that the United States will continue to counter ISIL [ISIS] terrorist plotters in any country where it is necessary.”

The White House statement continued by stating that “ISIL affiliates and other violent extremists attempt to find safe haven in areas with limited or poor governance” and vowing that Washington would “continue efforts to strengthen governance and support ongoing counterterrorism efforts in Libya...”

Of course the White House release makes no mention of how Libya became an area “with limited or poor governance” or how ISIS acquired the strength to occupy part of the country’s Mediterranean coast. Both are bound up with the 2011 US-NATO war for regime change that toppled and murdered the country’s longtime ruler, Muammar Gaddafi.

In addition to a protracted campaign of airstrikes, Washington and its allies armed and aided Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias to serve as proxy ground troops. These same forces were then funneled into Syria along with large quantities of arms seized from Libyan government stockpiles, escalating the war for regime change there against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Some of these same fighters then returned to establish strongholds in Libya itself.

In other words, the Pentagon and the Obama White House are proposing a second war in Libya to counter the effects that were created by the first. In both cases, the real US objective is to impose US domination over the North African country, which boasts the largest oil reserves on the African continent.

Even as plans are being rolled out for escalating the war in Iraq and Syria and launching a new one in Libya, the US Army general appointed to command American forces occupying Afghanistan testified at a Senate hearing Thursday that an escalation of the US intervention may be required in that country as well.

Lieut. Gen. John “Mick” Nicholson told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the security situation in Afghanistan was deteriorating and that US military forces would be required not only for stepped up “counterterrorism” operations, but also “to prevent the Taliban from retaking the provincial capital” of Kandahar.

The Taliban currently control more territory in Afghanistan than at any time since the US invasion of 2001, while the Afghan security forces are suffering record casualties—16,000 killed or wounded in 2015—that are described by US commanders as “unsustainable.”

Nicholson testified that in some areas, the Afghan security forces “have years to go” before they will be able to stand on their own. He indicated his agreement with the committee’s Republican chairman, Senator John McCain, who attacked Obama’s troop reductions.

There are currently 9,800 US troops occupying Afghanistan. As in Iraq, they are formally designated as advisers, trainers and special operators. In reality, they are heavily involved in combat operations, as was exposed in last October’s US war crime, the airstrike on the Doctors without Borders hospital in Kunduz that killed 42 medical staff and patients.

President Obama last October rescinded his previously announced plan to pull out virtually all US forces from Afghanistan, adopting a plan dictated by the Pentagon to keep the roughly 10,000 troops there, likely beyond the end of his presidency.

Nicholson’s testimony was followed Thursday afternoon by a statement to Pentagon reporters by Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, who vowed that the US military will “stick with Afghanistan, but not just in 2016, that’s 2017 and beyond.”

What clearly emerges from the events of the past week is that the Obama administration, which came to power on a wave of opposition to the two wars of aggression that killed over a million people under President George W. Bush, is preparing to leave the White House with the US military still engaged in combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, while waging new wars in Syria, Libya and beyond.