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US military, Obama administration plan massive military escalation in Syria and Iraq

By Patrick Martin

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The comments this weekend by spokesmen for the White House, the Pentagon and US Congress are part of an orchestrated campaign to stampede the American people into an all-out war in Iraq and Syria that could spread quickly throughout the Middle East.

The drumbeat for war has been carefully worked out to prepare public opinion in the United States and internationally for a dramatic escalation in military operations in the region, including the direct and open targeting of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Since President Obama announced the US war in Iraq and Syria in a nationally televised speech September 10, the White House and the American media have gone all-out to portray the conflict as a response to “terrorism” in the form of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamist organization whose sudden rise was fueled by assistance from US allies in the Persian Gulf and from the CIA itself.

On Friday, however, US officials began open discussion of the imposition of a “no-fly” zone in Syria, supposedly in response to appeals from the Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the only NATO ally in the region.

At a Pentagon press conference, both Major General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and defense secretary Chuck Hagel said that a no-fly zone over Syria was under consideration, along with a buffer zone on the Turkish-Syrian border near the town of Kobani, the scene of mass flight by Syrian Kurds under attack by ISIS forces.

Hagel said, “We’ve discussed all these possibilities and will continue to talk about what the Turks believe they will require.” Dempsey added that “a buffer zone might at some point become a possibility,” although that would involve some outside military force, likely Turkish, moving into Syrian territory.

There is a glaring contradiction between Obama’s claims to be fighting ISIS, and discussion of a no-fly zone, since this would be directed against the Assad regime, which controls the Syrian Air Force. ISIS has no planes, no helicopters and no aerial assets of any kind. A no-fly zone would mean scrapping the pretense of a war with ISIS and openly acknowledging the real purpose of the US intervention all along: the destruction of the Assad government and the establishment of a US puppet regime in Damascus.

Retired General Carter Ham, who headed the Pentagon’s Africa Command, explained the implications of a no-fly zone in an interview Sunday on the CBS program “Face the Nation.” Ham oversaw the no-fly zone imposed during the 2011 US-NATO war on Libya.

“We should make no bones about it,” he said. “It first entails killing a lot of people and destroying the Syrian air defenses and those people who are manning those systems. And then it entails destroying the Syrian air force, preferably on the ground, in the air if necessary. This is a violent combat action that results in lots of casualties...”

The designated White House representative on the Sunday morning television interview programs, Deputy National Security Adviser Anthony Blinken, confirmed that the administration was considering imposing a no-fly zone on Syria as part of its war plans in the region.

On Fox News Sunday, Blinken said, “We’re proceeding very deliberately and taking this one step at a time.” He added, “These are all things that we’re looking at over time, if they prove useful, necessary and effective, we’ll take them on.”

A further signal of the real direction of US policy came from Secretary of State John Kerry, in an op-ed column published Friday in the *Boston Globe*, under the headline, “Under US leadership, world will defeat ISIS.” Kerry went out of his way to rebut claims that bombing ISIS would help the Assad regime in Syria.

“We are not on the same side as Assad,” Kerry declared. “We are embarking on an important effort to train and equip vetted members of Syria’s opposition who are fighting the Islamic State and the regime at the same time.”

At the same time—and no doubt by prearrangement with the White House—the top congressional Republican, House Speaker John Boehner, declared his support for sending US ground combat troops to Iraq. Appearing on the Sunday ABC program “This Week,” Boehner

said, “At the end of the day, I think it’s gonna take more than air strikes to drive them outta there,” referring to ISIS. “At some point somebody’s boots have to be on the ground.”

Boehner was asked by interviewer George Stephanopoulos, “And if no one else will step up, would you recommend putting American boots on the ground?” Boehner replied, “We have no choice. These are barbarians. They intend to kill us. And if we don’t destroy them first, we’re gonna pay the price.”

Boehner added that if Obama proposed a resolution authorizing US combat operations in Syria and Iraq, he would call the House of Representatives back into session to vote on it. The House is in recess until after the November 4 congressional elections.

Asked about Boehner’s comment, White House representative Blinken replied, “We have been very clear that there will not be a US ground invasion of Iraq or Syria.”

Since no “invasion” of Iraq is at issue—the puppet regime in Baghdad will rubber-stamp any proposal for more US troops—this new formulation is a political signal of a shift towards the mobilization of significant US ground forces in the war, notwithstanding Obama’s repeated declarations, to delude antiwar opinion in the United States, that there will “no US ground troops” in Iraq or Syria.

The White House has steadily shifted its language on ground troops since the declaration by General Dempsey September 16 that if there were no alternative, he would urge Obama to reverse himself and order US ground troops to Iraq to prevent the collapse of the US puppet regime in Baghdad.

Meanwhile US airstrikes have continued in both Iraq and Syria. US warplanes pounded ISIS positions Friday around Kobani, the first time that targets have been hit so close to the Syria-Turkish border.

At the Pentagon press conference, Hagel gave the highest estimate for the cost of the war issued so far, as much as \$10 million a day. This would bring the cost of the bombing campaign to \$1 billion if it continues at the present level through the end of 2014. The cost would spiral upwards rapidly with a no-fly zone or deployment of large numbers of US ground troops.

Hagel also revealed that the first US troops had arrived in Saudi Arabia to begin training Syrian rebel forces under the auspices of the brutal and reactionary Saudi monarchy.

Overall, the US-led military operations in Iraq and Syria have now involved a dozen other countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, all of them engaged in the air war in Syria; and Britain, France, Canada, Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark, all contributing warplanes to the air war in Iraq.

The potential for a still wider spread of the conflict was indicated in the statements of Iranian ground forces commander Ahmad Reza Pourdestana Saturday, who warned that if ISIS

penetrated too far into Iraq's Diyala province, which borders on Iran, "we will attack deep into Iraqi territory and we will not allow it to approach our border."

These developments underscore the danger of the reckless and incendiary policy of US imperialism, which threatens to plunge the entire Middle East, and potentially the entire world, into a widening military conflagration.