

# US defense secretary outlines general military escalation in Middle East

By Thomas Gaist  
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The US Congress witnessed new heights of anti-Muslim hysteria and warmongering on Wednesday, as US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and Vice Chair of the Joint Chiefs General Paul Selva testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee about the ongoing escalation of US military operations in Iraq and Syria.

Leading US senators and top US military officials issued fervent calls for yet another round of sweeping escalations of the US air, ground and special forces operations throughout the Middle East, while invoking the prospect of future terror attacks by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in every second breath.

Carter unveiled proposals to send Apache attack helicopters to provide close air support and military advisers for ongoing Iraqi military operations aimed at retaking the city of Ramadi. These deployments would represent a major escalation of the US intervention, further making a mockery of President Barack Obama's pledges against placing US boots on the ground.

Wednesday's proceedings underscored that despite minor differences over the precise form of the stepped up operations, the US political and military establishments stand fully united behind an agenda of continuously escalating military aggression.

"We all agree that the intensity [of the ISIS war] has to be increased significantly and rapidly," Senator Jack Reed, the ranking Democrat on the armed services panel, noted during his opening statement. Reed vowed to ensure that the Pentagon would receive everything "that the department needs" to expand the fight against ISIS further afield.

Proposals for no-fly zones above Syria, militarized "safe zones" on the ground, stepped up covert operations by US commandos, focused on targeted

killings and the mobilization of ethnic death squads and proxy militias, found universal support among the assembled senators and military leaders.

In a familiar pattern, the Pentagon had already begun implementing provocative escalatory moves prior to the "oversight" hearing. US forces are engaged in ongoing operations aimed at massing new military assets along the Jordanian border, Secretary Carter revealed in the course of the hearing.

The Armed Services Committee's Republican chairman, Senator John McCain, played his usual role Wednesday, speaking on behalf of ultra-militarist sections of the US elite and pushing for a maximum program of US military aggression in the region.

McCain justified his proposals for yet another US military onslaught in the region by reciting a litany of terrorist attacks that would be repeated by every Senator in the chamber, referring to the destruction of the Russian jetliner over Sinai last month, the Paris terror attacks and the San Bernardino mass shooting, all of which he attributed definitively to ISIS.

McCain called for the US military to lead a large invasion force, backed by tens of thousands of troops drawn from allied governments and local forces, in a drive to seize control of the ISIS-held city of Raqqa and broader areas of northern Syria.

The ground campaign should be followed by a "long-term stabilization effort" based on a US "residual force," McCain said.

McCain also demanded that the Pentagon deploy a "greater forward presence of US military and intelligence" to a range of countries beyond Iraq and Syria where ISIS is alleged to be active.

The Obama administration has publicly resisted the super-aggressive recommendations of McCain and others on the Republican right. Wednesday's hearing

made clear, however, that the distance separating the administration's Syria policies from those advanced by the more hardline factions is being steadily eroded.

After making the obligatory references to Paris and San Bernardino, attacks which Carter described as "an assault on the civilization we defend," he went on to outline a comprehensive intensification of an array of US military operations stretching across the Middle East and beyond.

The US "will not hesitate to expand" its ground presence in Syria and Iraq, which already includes some 3,500 ground troops at six locations throughout Iraq, in addition to detachments of hundreds of US commandos deploying in the north, Carter said.

In Syria, US commandos are preparing to orchestrate an offensive against Raqqa by US proxy forces, including Sunni and Kurdish elements, with the aim of "collapsing ISIS control over the city," Carter said.

US forces in Iraq have been providing "increased lethal fire" in coordination with the Iraqi military, as part of stepped up joint combat operations with local forces. The US is already transferring combat engineering technologies and shoulder fired missiles to the Iraqi army and counter terrorism service units, Carter said.

The Pentagon is standing by to extend other forms of assistance to the Iraqi army, once Baghdad "resolves its political divisions," Carter said.

The US military is "urging Iraqi government to recruit, train, mobilize and pay, Sunni popular mobilization fighters in their communities," he said.

If the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi toes the US line, supporting Washington's efforts to develop Sunni militias as bulwarks against Iranian influence, it can expect new forms of US aid, including new helicopter gunship squadrons, complete with US pilots and advisors to organize their deployment. Abadi should embrace a "decentralized Iraq" in which a patchwork of "ethnic elements" would exercise effective independence within their own areas, Carter said.

Carter made clear that US forces will use Iraq's territory in part as a staging area for anti-Iranian machinations.

"On the military side, we are continuing unchanged in the need to deter and counter Iranian malign influence," he said.

Carter reiterated his recent announcement that the US is deploying a "specialized expeditionary targeting force" for covert operations in both Iraq and Syria. The expeditionary forces will focus on manhunting operations and will train Iraqi commandos to carry out similar operations, Carter said.

During the question and answer portion, Carter made clear that the Pentagon has issued itself a legal carte blanche to carry out whatever operations it sees fit in the name of the "war against ISIS."

Asked whether the US military required an updated Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) to carry out the plans he outlined, Carter replied, "I'll just note with respect to the AUMF, that we have—I'm not a lawyer but I'm told, and I'm glad, otherwise it would be a problem—we have the legal authority to do what we want to do."

In other words, Secretary Carter "has been told" by the Pentagon's legal team that his office wields limitless authority to seize and occupy territory at will, carry out black operations anywhere on earth, employ carpet bombing against civilian infrastructure, etc.

Carter's comments are clearly a reference to the Bush-era AUMFs, laws that President Barack Obama had previously condemned and pledged to end. While the administration has submitted a new ISIS-specific AUMF to Congress, it is not pressing for its consideration and there is little prospect of it being approved.

The sweeping powers invoked by Carter on the basis of the Bush administration's 13-year-old authorization of a criminal war based upon lies are by no means reserved for ISIS and other terrorist factions. Carter made clear in his concluding comments that, beyond the challenge of ISIS, the US government faces "decades of combating radicalism in general."

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