

US generals push for more troops in Iraq, Syria

By Bill Van Auken
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The US must escalate its intervention in Iraq and Syria with more troops on the ground, both the outgoing commander of US military forces in the Middle East and his designated replacement told Congress in hearings on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Gen. Joseph Votel, the current head of the US Special Operations Command, who has been tapped by President Barack Obama to lead US Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees both the ongoing intervention in Iraq and Syria and the continuing American occupation of Afghanistan, told the Senate Armed Services Committee Wednesday that an offensive to retake the Syrian city of Raqqa and the Iraqi city of Mosul from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) “will take more resources” than the Pentagon currently has deployed in the region.

His comments echoed those made the day before by the man he is succeeding, Gen. Lloyd Austin, who also pointed to the need for “additional capability” to launch an offensive against the two cities.

“Clearly there are things that we will want to do to increase the capability a bit to be able to increase the pace of operations, and that will require some additional capability,” Austin said.

“We have gone through and done some analysis ... to see what types of things we need to provide,” he continued. “And we have made some recommendations.”

While refusing to tell the committee precisely what he had recommended to the Obama administration, Austin indicated that it included the deployment of more US military personnel in order to increase the number of “advise and assist” teams deployed with Iraqi security forces, improve intelligence on the ground and intensify logistical support.

“We could increase some elements of the Special

Operations footprint,” he added.

Well over 4,000 US troops are already deployed in Iraq, while scores more have been sent into Syria, in violation of international law.

The “additional capability” demanded by the Pentagon brass will almost certainly entail thousands more American soldiers being sent into the two countries.

Austin also touched on the continuing US operation in Afghanistan, stressing that a “review” was needed of existing plans to draw down the number of US troops deployed there after the end of this year.

Referring to the defeats suffered at the hands of the Taliban by the security forces of the US puppet regime in Kabul, Austin said, “When the situation changes so that those facts are no longer valid or the assumptions that you made are no longer appropriate, then I think you have to go back and revisit your plan.”

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. Austin’s demand to “revisit” that plan indicates that the military brass believes that the current or even greater number of troops must remain in Afghanistan indefinitely.

Austin told the committee that the Pentagon currently has 84,000 US troops deployed in CENTCOM’s area of operations, along with “an unmatched ability to provide rapid reinforcement in response to unforeseen contingencies.”

In his testimony Wednesday, General Votel argued against any reduction of this US presence in the region on the grounds that it “could provide opportunities that other countries such as Russia or China could exploit.”

While Votel described ISIS as the biggest

“near-term” threat to US interests in the region, he stressed that Iran and Russia, which are both combating ISIS, represented the larger strategic challenge.

“We should understand that Iran is not ambiguous in their activities and their focus is on the United States,” the general said.

In describing CENTCOM’s mission, Votel placed the need to “check Iran’s malign influence” above that of seeking to “degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL [ISIS].”

The general’s comments came as Washington responded to Iran’s test firing Wednesday of two ballistic missiles. Speaking from Israel, where he was on a state visit to reassure the Zionist state in the wake of last year’s nuclear deal with Iran, Vice President Joe Biden vowed that the US “will act” if Iran violates the terms of the agreement. He added that the US was closely following Iran’s non-nuclear military activity, declaring “we will and are attempting to act wherever we can find it.”

Meanwhile, former secretary of state and Democratic presidential front-runner Hillary Clinton denounced the missile tests, declaring, “Iran should face sanctions for these activities and the international community must demonstrate that Iran’s threats toward Israel will not be tolerated.”

General Votel also echoed Austin’s testimony in calling for a revival of the Pentagon’s aborted “train and equip” program for the purpose of creating an “indigenous ground force” to further US operations in Syria.

A \$500 million Pentagon program for arming and training so-called “moderate rebels” ostensibly to fight against ISIS was terminated after General Austin admitted last September that no more than “four or five” such rebels were on the ground in Syria a year after the program was launched. Other US-trained elements sent into Syria rapidly surrendered to the Al Nusra Front, the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda, handing over their US-supplied armaments.

Votel faced questioning from the Senate panel over the composition of the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, which are being assisted by US Special Forces troops. He acknowledged that the group is “probably about 80 percent” Kurdish.

These forces are comprised of the YPG, the Syrian Kurdish militia, which reported on Monday that its

fighters are facing continuous artillery fire from the Turkish military in violation of a cessation of hostilities agreement brokered by the United Nations.

While Turkey is a NATO ally of the US, and Washington describes it as a key member of the “anti-ISIS coalition,” the Islamist government in Ankara has concentrated its fire on the Kurdish forces that the Pentagon is supporting, and there is extensive evidence that it has funneled arms and funding to ISIS and other Al Qaeda-linked forces in Syria.

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