

Pentagon Chief Outlines Plan for Escalation of Iraq-Syria War

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Global Research, January 15, 2016
[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)
Theme: [Terrorism](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)
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In a speech to US soldiers in the 101st Airborne Division about to deploy to Iraq, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter gave the most extensive account of the Pentagon's plans to escalate the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria over the next year.

In particular, he singled out the two largest urban areas controlled by ISIS, the city of Mosul in northern Iraq, third-largest in the country, and the group's de facto capital of Raqqa, in eastern Syria, as the main targets for coordinated air, ground and special operations warfare in the next period.

Carter's remarks Wednesday were clearly intended to build on the defense of the Obama administration's anti-ISIS campaign made in the president's State of the Union address Tuesday. Carter cited Obama's speech, telling the soldiers, "As the president, said we must, we can and we will deliver a lasting defeat to ISIL."

The Pentagon chief revealed that 200 special operations troops he ordered to Iraq last month are now on the ground and engaged in covert action against ISIS targets there. This is separate from the 50 special ops now working in northwestern Syria with insurgent forces, particularly the Kurdish PYG.

This "specialized expeditionary targeting force" will "begin going after ISIL's fighters and commanders, killing or capturing them wherever we find them, along with other key targets." How this differs from actual combat is a purely semantic distinction, aimed at preserving Obama's claim that he brought an end to the war in Iraq launched by George W. Bush.

Some 500 troops from the 101st Airborne headquarters will join the fighting in Iraq at the end of February. Another 1,300 troops from the 2nd Brigade Combat Team will deploy to Iraq in late spring to train Iraqi Army and Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers.

Carter outlined three military objectives for the US war against ISIS:

"One, destroy the ISIL parent tumor in Iraq and Syria by collapsing its two power centers in Mosul and Raqqa. Two, combat the emerging metastases of the ISIL tumor worldwide, and three, protect the homeland."

He spent most of his time elaborating on the first objective, telling the assembled soldiers, "Let me map for you where we are headed this year and where you'll be headed."

“The ISIL parent tumor has two centers—Raqqa in Syria, and Mosul in Iraq. ISIL has used its control of these cities and nearby territories as a power base from which to derive considerable financial resources, manpower and ideological outreach. They constitute ISIL’s military, political, economic and ideological centers of gravity.

“That’s why our campaign plan’s map has got big arrows pointing at both Mosul and Raqqa. We will begin by collapsing ISIL’s control over both of these cities and then engage in elimination operations through other territories ISIL holds in Iraq and Syria.”

Mosul is widely viewed as likely to prove the bloodiest battlefield, since ISIS forces have had 18 months to entrench themselves in this city of two million people. They captured it in June 2014 in a lightning offensive as Iraqi Army troops fled in disarray. “Reaching and retaking Mosul will not be easy, and it will not be quick,” Carter said. “There will be many engagements in between.”

Carter referred to the history of the 101st Airborne Division, which captured Mosul during the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, but he said that repeating such an attack would be counterproductive. “I know the 101st has taken Mosul before, and you could do it again,” he said. “We could deploy multiple brigades on the ground and arrive in force, but then it would likely become our fight and our fight alone.” Such an effort would “Americanize the conflict, giving ISIL the chance to call it a foreign occupation,” he warned.

Although he made no reference to this, such a full-scale ground assault by US combat troops would mean tens of thousands dead, with mass casualties not only among the Iraqi population, who would be the main victims, but among the American soldiers as well. Such an outcome would both further inflame the Middle East against US imperialism, and fuel antiwar sentiment at home.

Even more problematic, Carter continued, would be efforts to hold cities like Mosul and Raqqa if they were conquered by an invading force rather than by local allies of Washington, such as Kurdish and Iraqi government troops.

The Pentagon chief flatly rejected any withdrawal from Syria and Iraq or a hands-off policy by Washington. Such a policy “would surrender the strong and global leadership that the United States stands for.”

Instead, he explained,

“We are going to enable local, motivated forces and an international coalition with a clear campaign plan, with American leadership and with all of our awesome capabilities from airstrikes, special forces, cyber tools, intelligence, equipment, mobility and logistics, training, advise and assistance from those on the ground, including you.”

As this language indicates, US imperialism will be in control of the battle, while making use of local forces to do the bulk of the fighting and dying.

Carter told the soldiers that he expected both the US Congress and foreign allies to provide support and resources for the escalating conflict in Syria and Iraq. He demanded that Congress fully fund a pending budget request for the war in Syria. And he announced that

he would travel to Paris for a meeting January 20 with defense ministers from the other six imperialist powers that are playing a subsidiary role in the ground and air war: France, Australia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian announced Thursday that French warplanes had bombed an ISIS communications target near Mosul. "We have struck seven times since Monday," Le Drian said, referring to the overall French bombing in both Iraq and Syria.

Another key US ally in the war with ISIS is Jordan, whose King Abdullah visited Washington during the first three days of the week. His most important discussions were at the Pentagon Monday, where he met with Carter to discuss the fighting just across his country's borders.

Significantly, he suggested that the war was about to be waged at an "increased tempo." ISIS can be defeated "fairly quickly," he said in an interview with Wolf Blitzer of CNN. "Hopefully," he added, "the military party is short-term. The mid-term is going to be the intelligence and security aspect. The long-term is the ideological one and the educational one."

Meanwhile ISIS militants staged two devastating terror attacks against Shiite neighborhoods in Iraq Monday, killing more than 40 people. Gunmen attacked a shopping mall in eastern Baghdad Monday evening, backed by multiple suicide bombers. Seventeen people died, in addition to the bombers. A few hours later, nearly two-dozen people were killed in two bombings in Muqdadiya, a city northeast of Baghdad in Diyala province. An improvised explosive device killed several people, and a suicide car bomber drove into the crowd that responded to the first bombing.

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