

“Boots on the Ground” against ISIL? US Generals Challenge Obama on Ground Troops in Iraq, Syria

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The accelerating drive to a new US war in the Middle East, extending from Iraq to Syria and potentially beyond, has laid bare a stark contradiction between President Barack Obama’s public rejection of any US “boots on the ground” and increasingly assertive statements by top generals that such deployments cannot be ruled out.

Underlying this semi-public dispute between the US president—the titular “commander-in-chief”—and the military brass are the realities underlying another war of aggression being launched on the basis of lies for the second time in barely a decade.

It is being foisted on the American public as an extension of the 13-year-old “global war on terror,” with Obama warning this week that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) “if left unchecked... could pose a growing threat to the United States.”

In reality, the ISIS threat, such as it is, stems entirely from US imperialist interventions that have ravaged first Iraq, through a war and occupation that claimed some one million lives, and then Syria, in a US-backed sectarian war for regime-change—in which ISIS was the beneficiary of arms and aid from the US and its regional allies—that has killed well over 100,000 and turned millions into refugees.

The collapse of Iraq’s security forces in the face of an ISIS offensive that was part of a broader Sunni revolt against Iraq’s US-installed Shi’ite sectarian government is now being used as the justification for a US military intervention aimed at reasserting US military dominance in Iraq, intensifying the war to overthrow the Assad regime in neighboring Syria, and escalating the confrontations with the key allies of Damascus—Iran and Russia.

Such strategic ambitions cannot be achieved with such unreliable proxy forces as the Iraqi military and the so-called Syrian “rebels.” They require the unrestrained use of Washington’s military might. This is why the generals are publicly challenging the blanket commitment made by Obama ruling out any US ground war in Iraq or Syria.

Over the past several days, both White House and Pentagon spokesmen have issued “clarifying” statements in an attempt to smooth over what increasingly suggests something close to insubordination by the top uniformed brass against the president.

The *Washington Post* pointed to the conflict Friday in a lead article entitled “In military, skepticism of Obama’s plan,” writing, “Flashes of disagreement over how to fight the Islamic State are mounting between President Obama and US military leaders, the latest sign of strain in what often has been an awkward and uneasy relationship.”

The first major public airing of the divisions between the military command and the White House came Tuesday in congressional testimony in which Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated that circumstances in Iraq and Syria could require the introduction of US ground troops and he would not rule out their deployment. He added that the commander of CENTCOM, which oversees US military operations in the Middle East, had already proposed the intervention of US troops in the campaign to retake the Mosul dam last month, but had been overruled by the White House.

A day later, Obama appeared to rule out such action even more categorically, telling a captive audience of US troops at MacDill Air Force Base Wednesday: “As your commander-in-chief, I will not commit you and the rest of our Armed Forces to fighting another ground war in Iraq.”

This hardly settled the question, however. Speaking on the same day as the president, Gen. Ray Odierno, the Army chief of staff and former top US commander in Iraq, told journalists that air strikes would prove insufficient to achieve Washington’s ostensible goal of destroying ISIS. “You’ve got to have ground forces that are capable of going in and rooting them out,” he said.

Odierno intensified his argument on Friday, telling reporters that air strikes alone would grow increasingly problematic as ISIS forces intermingled with Iraq’s civilian population.

“When you target, you want to make sure you are targeting the right people,” the Army commander said. “The worst thing that can happen for us is if we start killing innocent Iraqis, innocent civilians.” He added that US ground forces would be needed to direct the bombing campaign.

Odierno referred to the 1,600 US troops the Obama administration has already deployed to Iraq as “a good start,” but added that as the US military campaign developed, so too could the demand for further deployments. “Based on that assessment we’ll make further decisions,” he said.

The Army chief warned that the US was embarking on a protracted war in the region. “This is going to go on,” he said.

“This is not a short term—I think the president said three years. I agree with that—three years, maybe longer. And so what we want to do is do this right. Assess it properly, see how it’s going, adjust as we go along, to make sure we can sustain this.”

As to US ground troops entering combat together with Iraqi units, Odierno stated, “I don’t rule anything out. I don’t ever rule anything out, personally.”

Even more blunt was Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis, the former commander of CENTCOM, who retired only last year. Testifying before the House Intelligence Committee, he directly attacked Obama’s public position of “no boots on the ground,” stating, “You just don’t take anything off the table up front, which it appears the administration has tried to do.”

Mattis added:

“If a brigade of our paratroopers or a battalion landing team of our Marines would strengthen our allies at a key juncture and create havoc/humiliation for our adversaries, then we should do what is necessary with our forces that exist for that very purpose.”

Even Obama’s defense secretary, Chuck Hagel, appeared to contradict the president’s assertion about no ground troops, telling the House Armed Services Committee Thursday, “We are at war and everything is on the table.” Hagel also revealed that the 1,600 “trainers” and “advisers” who have been deployed to Iraq are receiving combat pay.

It is apparent that the Obama administration is using a hyper-technical definition of “combat troops” to exclude the military’s special operation units from this category, even if they end up engaged in combat.

The position taken by the generals has found ample political support from the right-wing editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal* as well as congressional Republicans. The *Journal* argued in an editorial Friday that Obama’s “promise never to put ground troops into Iraq or Syria is already undermining the campaign before serious fighting begins against the Islamic State. Few believe him, and they shouldn’t if Mr. Obama wants to defeat the jihadists.”

The editorial compared Obama’s denial about “combat troops” to the claims made at the beginning of the Vietnam War that US troops were acting only as “advisers,” warning that the president could face the same fate as Lyndon Johnson, who “gave the impression of looming victory... only to have to escalate again and again.”

Rep. Howard “Buck” McKeon (Republican of California), the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, told the *Washington Post* that Obama should “follow the ... professional advice of the military” and “not take options off the table.”

The assertiveness of the top military brass in contradicting the White House is fed by the subservience and cowardice of civilian authorities, including the president and Congress. The latter adjourned this week after voting in both the House and Senate for Obama’s plan to shift \$500 million in Pentagon funding to the arming and training of so-called “moderate rebels” in Syria. The measure was inserted as an amendment to a continuing resolution to fund the federal government through mid-December.

No serious debate, much less direct vote, was taken on the region-wide war that Washington is launching in the Middle East. The legislators have no inclination to be seen taking a position on this action—much less an interest in exercising their constitutional power—for fear that it will reverberate against them at the polls in November. Any debate has been postponed until Congress reconvenes after the elections and, undoubtedly, after the war is well under way in both Syria and Iraq.

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