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By Bill Van Auken
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US threatens military escalation as Iraq confronts COVID-19 and oil price shock

US Secretary Mike Pompeo threatened the Iraqi government that the Pentagon will carry out fresh attacks in retaliation for rocket strikes on bases in Iraq housing US military personnel, according to a memo released by the State Department Monday.



U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo speaks to the press at the Department of State in Washington D.C. [State Department photo by Freddie Everett/Public Domain]

Pompeo held a telephone conversation Sunday with Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi, one day after the al-Taji base, north of Baghdad, was struck by 33 Katyusha

rockets leaving three US soldiers wounded, two of them seriously. The attack is the latest in a series of retaliations and counterretaliations that are spiraling dangerously toward the eruption of another major US war in the Middle East.

The threat of more US military action in Iraq comes as the country is reeling from the combined impact of the spreading coronavirus and a drastic fall in the price of oil, its virtually exclusive export.

The latest attack on the al-Taji base followed US airstrikes that left five Iraqi regular army soldiers, two policemen and one civilian worker, a cook, dead, along with a number of others wounded. The US bombing raids, which struck a civilian airport under construction outside Iraq's Shia holy city of Karbala were launched after an earlier rocket attack on Camp Taji, as the US military refers to the base, which killed two US and one British soldier. A separate strike against a base of the Kataib Hezbollah Shia militia in eastern Syria near the Iraqi border reportedly killed 18 fighters.

According to the State Department's readout of the call: "Secretary Pompeo reiterated that the Government of Iraq must defend Coalition personnel supporting the Iraqi government's efforts to defeat ISIS. Secretary Pompeo underscored that the groups responsible for these attacks must be held accountable. Secretary Pompeo noted that America will not tolerate attacks and threats to American lives and will take additional action as necessary in self-defense."

The tone of this ultimatum expresses all the arrogance of a colonial occupier toward an oppressed country.

US troops, more than 6,000 of them, are remaining in Iraq despite the vote of the country's parliament last January demanding their withdrawal.

That vote came after the criminal January 3 drone missile assassination of Gen. Qassem Suleimani, one of Iran's top officials, at Baghdad's international airport. Suleimani was murdered by the US government after arriving at the airport on a commercial flight en route to a meeting with Prime Minister Mahdi for discussions on diplomatic efforts to ease tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. While Trump administration officials initially claimed that the assassination was ordered to preempt imminent attacks, this pretext was subsequently dropped. The real motive for the killing was Washington's determination to disrupt any attempt to weaken its anti-Iranian axis based upon Israel, the Saudi monarchy and other Sunni Gulf oil sheikdoms.

Also killed in the attack was Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the leader of the Kataib Hezbollah, one of the largest components of the predominantly Shia Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Al-Muhandis was the deputy leader of the PMF, which played the predominant role in ground fighting against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which overran a third of Iraq in 2014, routing US trained security forces. By a vote of the Iraqi parliament, the PMF was incorporated into the country's armed forces as a kind of national guard.

Washington has blamed Kataib Hezbollah for the attacks on the al-Taji base, on the presumption that the militia has a motive for retaliating for the assassination of its commander. While the militia has not claimed responsibility for the rocket strikes, it has issued a warning that after March 15 operations would begin to drive foreign forces from Iraq.

Previously, the Pentagon blamed Kataib Hezbollah for an attack on an Iraqi base in Kirkuk last December that killed a US military contractor. The US military responded by launching an air strike that killed two dozen Shiite militia fighters, which in turn triggered an angry demonstration in Baghdad and the storming of the American embassy. This was followed by the drone assassination strike that killed Suleimani and al-Muhandis.

The Iraqi military, however, insisted that the Shia militia had had no presence near Kirkuk—a predominantly Sunni area—for the previous 18 months, and that the attack had been launched by ISIS.

As Pompeo was making his threats, Pentagon officials confirmed that US military personnel are being pulled out of smaller bases in Iraq and consolidated in a few more defensible locations, where Patriot missile batteries and so-called Counter Rocket, Artillery and Mortar (C-RAM) systems are being deployed over the protests of the Baghdad government. The deployment of the Patriot missiles is also seen as paving the way for a US attack on Iran, by providing protection against Iranian retaliation.

The Pentagon attempted to put a bright face on its circling of the wagons in Iraq, claiming that the occupation force it leads: “remains in Iraq at the invitation of the Government of Iraq to defeat ISIS; since 2014, together, we have liberated more than 55,000 square kilometers and freed millions of Iraqi people from ISIS murderous rule. Our troops are re-positioning in coordination with the Government of Iraq. Due to operational security, we will not announce a specific timetable for the troop movements.”

This is of course all lies and nonsense. The US-led forces remain in Iraq in defiance of the country's parliament and in the face of the overwhelming hostility of the Iraqi people.

They are not acting in coordination with any elements within the Iraqi military or government.

Maj. Gen. Tashin al-Khafaji, the spokesperson for the Iraq Joint Operations Command, a body formed to coordinate operations between the US military and Iraqi security forces, announced on Sunday the suspension of all cooperation and joint operations with the US-led foreign forces in response to last Friday's US-British airstrikes. The general denounced the strikes as an act of aggression against Iraq's official armed forces. In an earlier statement, the Iraqi representatives on the Joint Operations Command called upon the government to speed up the expulsion of US troops from Iraq, warning that their continued presence posed a severe threat to the country's stability.

Pentagon officials told NBC News that several hundred US troops leaving the smaller Iraqi bases would be pulled out of the country. With the deployment of the Patriot batteries and C-RAM systems, however, the number of troops on the ground would likely increase. While officially the Pentagon places the number of US military personnel in Iraq at 5,200, thousands of additional soldiers and Marines were sent into the country during the buildup of tensions that culminated in the assassination of Suleimani.

It is abundantly clear that the US is not in Iraq to fight ISIS. On the contrary, American commanders openly acknowledge that they now see the Shia militias that defeated ISIS with assistance from Iran as their principal enemy. Just as Washington is backing al-Qaeda-linked militias in Syria, it may well begin lending support to ISIS in Iraq in order to better divide and rule the country, while preparing for a direct military confrontation with Iran.

Meanwhile, the ravages of the coronavirus are posing an increasing threat to Iraq, while Iran remains one of the epicenters of the global pandemic. The Iraqi government announced a curfew in the capital of Baghdad Tuesday which will run until March 24 in an effort to slow the spread of the virus. The government has thus far reported 110 confirmed cases and 10 deaths.

The situation in Iran, whose infrastructure, health care system and access to medicine and basic supplies have been crippled by US "maximum pressure" sanctions, is far more severe. On Monday it was reported that 129 people had died from the coronavirus over the previous 24 hours, bringing the overall death toll to over 850.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee last week, General Kenneth McKenzie, the chief of the US Central Command, which oversees American military

operations throughout the Middle East and in Afghanistan, gloated over the death toll and the infection of senior figures in the Iranian leadership, quipping, “of course, death is permanent.”

McKenzie speculated that the crisis created by US sanctions, plummeting oil prices and the coronavirus crisis could provoke Tehran to launch military aggression. In the same breath, he noted that the US now has two aircraft carrier-led strike groups in the Persian Gulf region for the first time since 2012.

Even as the coronavirus confronts the US and the world with a crisis of unprecedented dimensions, US imperialism is calculating how it can exploit this crisis to advance its interests through an escalation of military aggression that can ignite war throughout the Middle East and the entire planet.

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