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Washington seeks alliance with Tehran as civil war in Iraq intensifies

By Chris Marsden

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US Secretary of State John Kerry said Monday that Washington was willing to talk to Iran about collaborating to beat back a Sunni insurgency led by the Al Qaeda offshoot Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. ISIS has already gained control of most of Iraq's Sunni regions in northern and central Iraq and is threatening Baghdad.

In an interview with Yahoo!News, Kerry said he “wouldn't rule out anything that would be constructive to providing real stability.” He added, “I think we are open to any constructive process here that could minimize the violence, hold Iraq together—the integrity of the country—and eliminate the presence of outside terrorist forces that are ripping it apart.”

Kerry gave the interview in Vienna, where he was holding talks with Iranian officials on that country's nuclear program. His statement followed press reports of two “senior US officials” saying the Obama administration was exploring direct talks with Iran over the crisis in Iraq.

The Pentagon subsequently issued a statement denying that it was discussing joint military action with Iran in Iraq. “There are no plans to consult Iran on military actions inside Iraq. There is no plan to coordinate military activities,” said Pentagon spokesman Rear Adm. John Kirby told reporters.

Despite the Pentagon disclaimer, the fact that the United States is publicly asking for Iran's help is a measure of the desperation of American policy makers as Washington's decades-long policy in Iraq and the broader Middle East implodes under the weight of its own contradictions. Another sign was the official announcement over the weekend that the US is drawing down its staff at the mammoth US embassy fortress in Baghdad, the first time since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 that Washington has taken such a precaution.

For more than decade, Washington has carried out a steady drumbeat of threats and provocations against Iran, imposing brutal economic sanctions, waging cyberwar, conspiring to assassinate Iranian nuclear scientists, and repeatedly raising the possibility of military action against the country. During the eight-year US military occupation of Iraq—which killed a million Iraqis, incited sectarian warfare and destroyed the country's infrastructure—the US government and media routinely blamed attacks on US troops on Iran.

The neo-con authors of the US invasion of Iraq, many of whom went on to occupy high positions in the George W. Bush administration, made clear in a statement published in September, 2000 that the ultimate target of the conquest of Iraq was Iran. *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, published by the Project for the New American Century, declared that “the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein... Over the long term, Iran may well prove as large a threat to US interests in the Gulf as Iraq has.”

Now, however, ISIS, a Sunni jihadist force nurtured and armed by Washington and its Sunni Gulf allies (Saudi Arabia, Qatar) as a proxy force to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, is threatening to topple Washington's Shia sectarian puppet regime, headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, in Iraq. In the face of a debacle without precedent since the defeat of US forces in Vietnam 34 years ago, the US is turning to yesterday's “Axis of Evil” bogeyman, Shia-led Iran.

Any US accommodation with Iran for the purpose of defending US interests in Iraq can be no more than a temporary arrangement that will not preclude further American threats and attacks on Iran in the future.

The Obama administration is stepping up preparations for a direct US military intervention in Iraq. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel on Monday ordered the “quick reaction” USS Mesa Verde into the Persian Gulf with the stated aim of protecting US personnel in Baghdad. The Mesa Verde carries 500 Marines as well as MV-22 attack helicopters. Washington's response to the catastrophe its military has produced in Iraq and the wider region will be to compound its crime with more military violence.

ISIS, with 4,000–5,000 fighters, leads an insurgency that includes Saddam-era officers and soldiers. It was in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Turkmen-majority town of Tal Afar to ISIS, which already controls Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, as well as Fallujah, Ramadi, Tikrit and other cities, that the Obama administration said it was evacuating a part of its 5,000 embassy staff.

The Mesa Verde joins three other US naval ships, including the USS George H.W. Bush aircraft carrier, named after the architect of the 1991 war against Iraq. It is equipped with Patriot missiles that can reach any part of Iraq. The administration has also broached the use of drone strikes, probably mounted from Turkey.

The response to the insurgency by Maliki has been desperate and brutal. There are widely-circulated reports of Iraqi Army air strikes on the northern town of Tikrit being “indiscriminate” and “continuous.” Many of the hundreds of thousands who are fleeing ISIS-overrun areas are seeking to escape government air strikes as well as ISIS reprisals.

It is difficult to imagine a more cynical display of realpolitik than the moves toward a US-Iran alliance in Iraq. This is true not only in relation to the US, but also Iran, whose bourgeois rulers want nothing more than an accommodation with the US.

US political figures, who only weeks ago were agitating for war against Iran, have queued up to call for a rapprochement with Tehran in order to bring the region back under US control. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham told CNN, “The Iranians can provide some assets to make sure Baghdad doesn’t fall.”

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has made clear he is ready to collaborate with the US in a bloodbath. “Until today, no specific request for help has been demanded. But we are ready to help within international law,” he said.

More than 130 Iranian Revolutionary Guards are reportedly in Iraq to train Maliki’s forces. Their commander, Qasem Suleimani, was in Baghdad this weekend. An official in Tehran said more than 4,200 Iranians have volunteered to travel to Iraq to protect Shiite shrines.

As could be expected, there is a bitter dispute over whether the US should respond to the destabilisation of Iraq by pursuing its war aims in Syria more forcefully, or seeking an accommodation with Damascus alongside Tehran.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power spent the last week in Jordan and Turkey, where she discussed the war in Syria and developments in Iraq. Power, one of the chief advocates of “humanitarian” wars, while condemning the ISIS attacks in Iraq, said the US remained “in lockstep with Turkey on seeking an end to the Assad regime.”

Muhammad Nour al Khallouf, the acting defense minister for Syria’s opposition coalition, used the crisis to appeal for arms, stating, “For the first time, I feel there’s a kind of seriousness to support the [Free Syrian Army].”

In contrast, writing in *USA Today*, William Young of the RAND Corporation, proposed, “The answer may lie instead in a negotiated settlement, which includes negotiating with Syrian President Bashar Assad, perhaps brokered through the Russians and Iranians.”

The Syrian army, in coordination with the Maliki government in Iraq, this weekend launched mortar attacks on major bases of ISIS, including those in the northern province of Raqa and in Hasakeh in the northeast, bordering Iraq.

China has also made supportive noises regarding the Maliki regime, hoping to curry favour with Washington. The Foreign Ministry issued a statement that “For a long time, China has been giving Iraq a large amount of all sorts of aid and is willing to give whatever help it is able to.”

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov complained, “For internal political reasons, the US withdrew their forces when the Iraqi security forces had been far from being prepared to enforce law and order on the entire territory of the country.”

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, in the *Welt am Sonntag*, ruled out military involvement and called on Turkey, the Gulf States and Iran to help stabilise Iraq. “We have to prevent a proxy war of the regional powers breaking out on Iraqi soil,” he said.