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Is Obama's new Iraq strategy just a cover for expanding his secret war?

He says 'American forces will not be returning to Iraq' – but if you read between the lines, covert drones could be flying over troubled waters. Time to play covert Whac-a-Mol

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At the White House on Thursday afternoon, the American president outlined an everything-but-the-war strategy that was classic Barack Obama: his press briefing offered perhaps a telling signal about his own expansive version of the Global War on Terror, while still managing to be subtly evasive about what he might actually do in Iraq.

The US military will be increasing surveillance, Obama said, preparing to send military "advisers" to Iraq and urging, not so subtly, for a political shift away from Nouri al-Maliki's government. He did not, of course, answer the question on everyone's minds about how America plans to deal with the Iraq crisis: Will Obama engage in fighting to stabilize the country?

"American forces will not be returning to combat in Iraq," Obama insisted. And though he didn't rule out airstrikes against the group that's seized a wide swath of Iraq extending from the Syrian border down to the gates of Baghdad – the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Isis) – it's because Obama didn't mention any potential bombings at all.

Maybe that omission is a clue that we're thinking about Thursday's announcement and the potential for military involvement in Iraq all wrong. Maybe we'll never get answers to our questions because US military involvement in Iraq will be like it is over most of the world: conducted in secret by spy agencies and special forces, publicly accountable only when Obama is dragged, kicking and screaming, to come clean.

Hints in the president's remarks suggest another distinct possibility exists: that rather than ramp back up the old war in Iraq, Obama instead might be expanding his ongoing covert operations in Libya, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan and elsewhere to include Iraqi territory. Maybe Iraq will just become another front in the forever war.

"Rather than try to play Whac-a-Mole wherever these terrorist organizations may pop up," Obama said, "what we have to do is to be able to build effective partnerships, make sure that they have capacity." And he may well try to form sometimes odious partnerships, but for the moment, Whac-a-Mole is indeed what Obama's been doing, whether nabbing terrorists in Libya or this week's attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas. And there's no reason to think Obama won't use his mallet all over the vanishing geography of Iraq.

Just look at the one concrete model Obama cited in questions after delivering his five-point Iraq plan on Thursday: Yemen.

We have been able to help to develop [the Yemeni government's] capacities without putting large numbers of US troops on the ground at the same time as we've got enough CT – or counterterrorism – capabilities that we're able to go after folks that might try to hit our embassy or might be trying to export terrorism into Europe or the United States.

That "CT" capability, of course, includes the waging of an American covert war in Yemen, which includes drone strikes against militants conducted under a broad view of the post-9/11 authorization for military force against Al Qaida. Note Obama's use of the word "large", suggesting that even his model country has seen some American boots on the ground in the form of covert special operations soldiers.

American counter-terror capabilities serve as Obama's calling card the world over. The famous raid that captured Osama bin Laden was only a piece of a Pakistan strategy that's seen more than 2,000 drone strikes; after taking five months off, three US strikes this month in Pakistan killed between 14 and 24 people. With attention turned to Iraq, the secret war in Yemen is rapidly expanding: more than 20 separate US covert actions have been reported there in 2014 alone, including a drone strike last week. And yet outside rare and tightly controlled leaks, there is little to nothing of official word about America's sprawling footprint in wars across thousands of miles of terrain.

Boundaries don't seem to be an issue in potential strikes against Isis either. Because the group spans the border between Iraq and Syria, a reporter asked a senior administration official on a call with reporters after Obama's speech if the US might strike Syrian territory. The official responded that the Pentagon refused to "restrict US action to a particular space" when direct national interests were at stake.

"We'll take action focusing on an imminent threat," the official said. "We take action in this region in Yemen, in Somalia against Al Shabaab. We're going to do what's necessary."

To be sure, Obama will find a way to do it. Questions have emerged about his ability to authorize more US war in Iraq, but the existing logic of addressing an expansively-defined "imminent threat" serves as the administration's ticket to hitting wherever and however it wants.

"We're not at the stage where we're preparing for airstrikes," an official said on the call. "And if it comes to that, we're going to do it the same way we do it elsewhere in the world."

That ought to give us all some pause. Despite Obama's disquisition, Yemen ain't going so great. Neither is Somalia, another theater in this worldwide covert war. Nor is Pakistan faring so well.

Announcements or not, authorizations or not, air strikes or not, Whac-a-Mole par excellence may soon be coming to a theater near you, Iraq.