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The US Contemplates Partitioning Iraq

By James Cogan

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During an exchange in the House Armed Services Committee last Wednesday, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter announced that the Obama administration was prepared to accept the break-up of Iraq as a unified national-state.

What if a multi-sectarian Iraq turns out not be possible?” Carter asked rhetorically. “That is an important part of our strategy now on the ground. If the government can’t do what it’s supposed to do, then we will still try to enable local ground forces, if they’re willing to partner with us, to keep stability in Iraq—but there will not be a single state of Iraq.

Carter’s brazen statement underscores, once again, the predatory and colonial character of decades of US interventions in the Middle East—as well as the endless lies utilized to justify them.

Just 10 months ago, the American people were told by the Obama administration that US military operations were resuming in Iraq in order to defend it against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which was threatening its survival. As recently as April, with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi standing beside him, Obama declared at the White House that “United States’ prime interest,” alongside defeating ISIS, was “to respect Iraqi sovereignty.”

A few months later, the Obama administration has signalled that it is indifferent to the country’s sovereignty and even its existence.

The change in US rhetoric follows the Iraqi army’s retreat from Ramadi in western Anbar province, which left the Sunni-majority city and vast amounts of US-supplied equipment in ISIS hands. In response, Obama’s promises that American ground troops would not be sent back into combat to Iraq are being cast aside. Last week, the White House authorised 450 personnel to deploy to a base between Ramadi and Fallujah.

From their stronghold, the American “advisors” will be tasked with paying local Sunnis to end their collaboration with ISIS against the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government and join US-armed militias that will fight the Islamic extremists. The so-called “lily pad” concept will be broadened in the coming weeks, and the advisors will accompany their Iraqi mercenaries into combat zones in order to direct supporting air strikes.

In northern Iraq, Carter effectively announced that the US will begin to send arms and supplies directly to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which already rules its territory as a de-facto separate state. Just days earlier, he had stated that arming the KRG directly was “inconsistent with the longstanding US foreign policy of working to maintain a stable, unified Iraq.” Through the KRG, however, assistance is being provided to Kurdish rebel forces in northern Syria, which have inflicted significant defeats on ISIS in recent weeks.

In Syria, the US is responding, not only to the advances by Kurdish militia in the north against ISIS, but to victories in the south of the country by Sunni rebels—trained and supplied by US allies Jordan and Saudi Arabia—against the Iranian-backed Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad. Assad’s forces have lost control over most of the country.

The shift in US policy also comes amid the growing importance of Iranian assistance in defending Abadi’s government in the territory it still controls. Shiite-based militias, aided by Iranian advisors, have borne the brunt of fighting to drive back ISIS incursions close to Baghdad

and the majority Shiite-populated areas of Iraq. Tehran's efforts to save the Iraqi state, however, are denounced by Carter and the US military as "Iranian malign influence."

In a comment on Carter's statements and the situation in the Middle East, *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer pointed to the conclusions that are being drawn in US ruling circles. American policy toward Iraq and Syria, he wrote, must begin "by admitting that the old borders are gone, that a unified Syria and Iraq will never be reconstituted, that the Sykes-Picot map is defunct."

Sykes-Picot was the sordid imperialist agreement, between Britain and France, to carve up and divide the Middle East between them at the end of World War I. It resulted, after considerable bloodshed and colonial repression, in the establishment of nation-states such as Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Kuwait. A century later, in pursuit of its imperialist agenda today, the United States is more than prepared to tear these states apart.

From the time of the first Iraq War in 1990-1991, the only "prime interest" of US imperialism in the Middle East has been to ensure that it exerts unchallenged military domination over the Persian Gulf and the world's major reserves of oil.

The illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, justified with the lies over "weapons of mass destruction," was followed by the systematic persecution of supporters of the former regime of Saddam Hussein, above all in the Sunni population. The successive puppet governments formed in Baghdad were based on coalitions between Shiite religious parties and Kurdish nationalists.

The departure of US forces in 2011, after nine years of mass killing and repression, which claimed as many as one million Iraqi lives, was followed by the further sectarian marginalisation of the Sunni population by the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

ISIS had its origins among the Sunni-based extremists who fought the US occupation and the Shiite-dominated government in Iraq. In Syria, however, such forces became a useful pawn in Washington's agenda of regime-change. The US facilitated Islamist militias emerging as the leading force in the armed rebellion that developed after 2011 against the Russian and Iranian-backed Assad government. ISIS, in particular, received large quantities of weapons and funds through US allies in the region.

In June 2014, as a result of tacit US support, ISIS was able to cross back into Iraq with substantial strength and capture the major northern city of Mosul. The utter debacle of US policy nevertheless became the Obama administration's pretext for not only returning forces to Iraq, in order to undermine growing Iranian influence, but initiating direct air strikes in Syria—which at a certain point will be unleashed against what remains of Assad's military.

The US violence in the Middle East, and its intrigues with various ethno-sectarian factions, is a crime of immense dimensions. It has resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths, incalculable suffering and the greatest refugee and displacement crisis since World War II. Any attempt by Washington to preside over a new colonial carve-up and re-division of the region's borders raises the danger of even greater carnage for the region's—and the world's—population.

