

You are next, Obama tells Islamic State leaders

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The stepped-up US air war and increasing Special Forces activity against Islamic State targets has Islamic State leaders in the cross hairs, President Barack Obama said yesterday.

In an appearance at the Pentagon, the US defence headquarters outside Washington, Obama named eight prominent Islamic State members killed this year in a campaign against the organisation's leadership.

Among the dead were the group's second-in-command, a top online recruiter, the head of the movement's Libya chapter, the infamous video executioner nicknamed "Jihadi John", individuals leading finance and weapons trafficking and one whom Obama described as the "senior extortionist."

"(Islamic State) leaders cannot hide," he said, "and our next message to them is simple: You are next."

Obama and the White House National Security Council were at the Pentagon for a briefing on progress against the Islamic State organisation, which seized large swathes of Iraq and Syria in the last two years.

US Defence Secretary Ash Carter left immediately after the meeting, to visit allies in the Middle East in hopes of drumming up more "military contributions" against Islamic State forces, Obama (*photo*) said, without specifying Carter's destinations.

"Just as the United States is doing more in this fight, just as our allies - France, Germany and the United Kingdom, Australia and Italy - are doing more, so must others," Obama said.

Carter's trip comes with US Secretary of State John Kerry due in Moscow today for talks with the Russian government to further the diplomatic process that has spawned plans for a meeting next month

between the Syrian government and more moderate rebels. Both sides in the so-called Vienna process are battling Islamic State forces.

Asked later about current efforts by the US' Middle East partners, White House spokesperson Josh Earnest said "that some" Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations - made up of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates - appeared "somewhat distracted by the sectarian conflict in Yemen in a way that has diverted resources" from the fight against Islamic State.

Earnest added that the US would like the GCC countries to help with the counter messaging campaign against Islamic State, which he said was "in some ways ... probably the most challenging part of this

effort... And there is an important role for... our GCC partners to play in that effort."

Pace of airstrikes accelerated

Obama said that the pace of airstrikes against Islamic State targets had accelerated, with more bombs dropped against the group in November than in any month since the first US actions in Iraq in August 2014. In all, 9,000 airstrikes have been carried out since then.

Recent targets have included the group's oil tanker trucks and oil infrastructure, which are believed to be an important source of the Islamic State wealth.

The US strategy "is moving forward with a great sense of urgency," Obama said.

The US is pursuing four "fronts" against Islamic State: "Hunting down and taking out these terrorists; training and equipping Iraqi and Syrian forces to fight (Islamic State) on the ground; stopping

(Islamic State's) operations by disrupting the recruiting, financing and propaganda; and finally persistent diplomacy to end the Syrian civil war, so that everyone can focus on destroying (the Islamic State)."

In addition to strike fighters, bombers and drones, Obama has assigned US Special Operations troops to the military effort.

Last week, Carter said that the "specialised expeditionary targeting force" was assisting Iraqi government forces and Kurdish Peshmerga and could carry out "unilateral operations" in Syria.

Obama said yesterday that US special forces "are playing a vital role in this fight".

Earnest said Obama "was acknowledging... that the work that the president has given to our Special Forces in Syria has begun."

"The intensification of our efforts inside of Syria... has commenced."

- *dpa*

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