

Obama sends more US troops to Iraq

Patrick Martin
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Another 200 US troops arrived in Baghdad Sunday, swelling the reinforcements rushed to Iraq to nearly 800 in the three weeks since the fall of Mosul, the country's third-largest city, to Sunni Islamist forces. President Obama formally notified Congress of the additional troop movement in a letter Monday.

A Pentagon spokesman said the latest contingent of US troops would be equipped for combat and deployed mainly to secure Baghdad International Airport, a critical lifeline for the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Together with the soldiers, the US military is dispatching helicopter gunships and reconnaissance drones.

Two previous increments of US troops included 275 to provide security at the huge US embassy in Baghdad and 300 special forces soldiers to coordinate tactical operations by the Iraqi army and collect targeting information for future US bomb and missile attacks on fighters of Islamic State (formerly the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the main Sunni Islamist group spearheading attacks on the Maliki regime. Three special forces teams have deployed north of the capital in the last few days, into the area of the heaviest fighting.

The first major counteroffensive by Iraqi Army units continued Monday in Tikrit, one of the Sunni-populated cities seized by the Islamic State since its offensive began June 10. The military operation started Saturday night but has been slowed by heavy resistance, including widespread use of landmines.

The stepped-up US intervention is only one of many indications that the conflict in Iraq could touch off a much wider regional war. In the last few days:

* ISIS announced that it was changing its name to Islamic State and abolishing the border between Iraq and Syria, which it now largely controls.

* Syrian warplanes have struck Islamic State targets within Iraq.

* Fighters for Islamic State and rival Sunni militants battled in the Syrian border town of Boukamal.

* Five Russian Sukhoi fighter jets arrived in Iraq for the Iraq Air Force, and Russian officials said military advisers would follow to provide training and maintenance.

* Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani visited Kirkuk, the center of the northern portion of Iraq's oil industry, which Kurdish peshmerga forces occupied after the Iraqi Army collapsed in the face of the offensive of Islamic State. He vowed never to withdraw from the city, long claimed by the Kurds but divided in population among Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen.

* Israel announced it would recognize a Kurdish state should the Kurdish Regional Authority declare its independence from Baghdad

* British foreign minister William Hague visited Barzani in the Kurdish capital of Irbil, where Barzani again reaffirmed his determination to incorporate Kirkuk into the Kurdish territory.

* Saudi King Abdullah, responding to pressure from US Secretary of State John Kerry, said the monarchy would back efforts to form a new coalition government in Iraq, including Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish parties, but excluding the current prime minister, Maliki.

* The leader of Iran's Quds Force, the special forces wing of the Revolutionary Guards, spent several days in Iraq consulting with the Maliki government, long supported by Tehran, and with Iraqi military leaders. Iran has stepped up military aid to Maliki and may have deployed reconnaissance drones over Iraq.

Kerry's visit to Saudi Arabia produced further comments from US officials to the effect that once bombing of Iraq targets began, it would be unlikely that the Obama administration would hold back from similar action against Islamic State in Syria. *The Wall Street Journal* noted: "Mr. Kerry ended his weeklong trip to the Middle East and Europe on Friday in Saudi

Arabia, in a visit that brought the Iraq and Syria crises into a single frame. The US diplomat held meetings in the Red Sea city of Jeddah with Saudi King Abdullah as well as with Ahmed Jarba, head of Syria's main political opposition coalition.”

Political maneuvering within Iraq has reached fever pitch on the eve of the July 1 convening of the parliament elected April 30. While Maliki’s Shiite-based State of Law coalition has the largest bloc, 92 out of 350 seats, forming a majority within the constitutionally required 45-day period is expected to be a protracted struggle.

The parliament will begin by electing a Sunni member as speaker, then the largely ceremonial president—expected to be a Kurd—and then a Shiite prime minister, who will actually run the government. Several prominent Shiite leaders, including the country’s top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, have called for a quick agreement on the three positions, increasing the pressure on Maliki to step down rather than seek a third term.



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