

US troops sent to Iraq's Anbar province

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The Pentagon has dispatched at least 50 US troops, including “advisers” and “force protection” forces, to Iraq’s embattled western province of Anbar, 80 percent of which is reportedly under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The elements that arrived Tuesday are the advance team for a much larger deployment, which will include the bulk of the 1,500 additional troops whose dispatch to Iraq the Pentagon announced last week, effectively doubling the American forces on the ground in the country.

Anbar, which is predominantly Sunni, was the scene of the bloodiest fighting during the more than eight-year US war and occupation, which ended in 2011. It had risen in revolt against the Shia sectarian government of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki last year, paving the way for the rapid advance of ISIS and routing of the corrupt and crumbling US-trained Iraqi army.

The US military’s advance team has been sent to the sprawling desert Al-Asad air base, which was a principal hub for US military operations during the 2003-2011 occupation before it was turned over to Iraqi security forces.

A spokesman for the US Central Command, which is in charge of American military operations throughout the Middle East, denied Iraqi reports that the troops had been dispatched to arm Sunni tribes that are hostile to ISIS. The spokesman, Col. Patrick Ryder, added, however, that the troops were armed to meet “force protection requirements.”

The arming and funding of Sunni tribal militias to fight the predecessor of ISIS, Al Qaeda in Iraq, became a major part of the US strategy in Anbar after repeated offensives and wholesale massacres like the ones carried out in Fallujah had failed to crush resistance.

The new Iraqi government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi is at least nominally committed to a similar

strategy, but it has failed to materialize under conditions of bitter sectarian divisions resulting from the US occupation’s divide-and-rule strategy, followed by the Shia sectarian policies of the Maliki government, which was installed by Washington.

While Abadi has verbally committed himself to the formation of an inclusive national unity government, as demanded by Washington, the commanders of the overwhelmingly Shia security forces, appointed by Maliki for their political loyalty, remain unchanged.

Moreover, according to a report in the *Washington Post*, the government’s limited attempts to funnel arms to the Sunni tribes have been undermined by rampant corruption in the security forces, with officers selling on the black market arms and ammunition allocated for the tribes.

“Until now we haven’t really seen any support from the Kurdish or Iraqi government,” Sheikh Khalid al-Shammari, a tribal leader, told the *Post*. “We were asked to gather names for one battalion, 350 to 450 people... We’ve done that and submitted it weeks ago, but we’ve heard nothing.”

Despite President Barack Obama’s boast on Sunday that “we are now in a position to start going on some offense,” most military analysts insist that the sporadic bombing campaign carried out by the US military over the past three months has done little to change the situation on the ground. Most predict that the doubling of the number of US troops in Iraq, with the new 1,500-strong deployment announced last Friday, is only the first installment of what will inevitably be many more US “boots on the ground.”

Anthony Cordesman, former Pentagon official and adviser and now chief military analyst for the Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, wrote in a November 10 report, entitled “The Islamic State War: No Clear US Strategy,” that the recent escalation of US troop levels

in Iraq was only the beginning.

Washington, Cordesman states, “has only made slow and unstable progress in developing a strategy to deal with the Islamic State, and shaping a workable US political and military approach to degrading the Islamic State and dealing with the other US strategic priorities involved.”

These “priorities,” he indicates, are not a matter of countering terrorism, but rather of reorganizing both Iraq and Syria to serve US strategic interests. The problems the US encounters are largely of its own making, i.e., bitter sectarian conflicts arising from the destruction of Iraqi society through more than eight years of war and occupation, and the decimation of Syria in a proxy war for regime-change.

Cordesman writes, “As noted earlier, it is also far from clear that President Obama’s announcement on November 7, 2014 that he planned to send some 1,500 more troops to support the 1,400-1,900 already in Iraq will come close to meeting the need.”

Reviewing the Pentagon announcement of the 1,500 additional troops, he says: “On the one hand, a careful reading shows that this deployment may only be the start of a much larger deployment. The President also said that \$5.6 billion would be provided for operations against the Islamic State and to help create effective Iraqi forces. The request included \$5 billion for the Defense Department to conduct a range of military operations against ISIL in the Middle East, of which \$1.6 billion was for an Iraqi train-and-equip fund.”



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