

Top general says US troops may be needed to retake Iraqi cities

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15 November 2014

The Pentagon is “certainly considering” sending US ground troops into Iraq for inevitably bloody battles to retake Mosul, the country’s second-largest city, from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and to secure the predominantly Sunni Anbar province and its border with Syria, the top uniformed US commander told a Congressional hearing Thursday.

Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, addressed the House Armed Services Committee barely one week after the Obama administration ordered the doubling of the number of US troops deployed in Iraq, with another 1,500 “advisers” being sent into the country, most of them to embattled Anbar province.

With the new US war in the Middle East now in its fourth month, there is every indication that this was only the first in what will prove a series of military escalations as Washington pursues a strategy that extends well beyond the stated aim of “degrading and destroying” ISIS.

Dempsey urged “strategic patience” in what he described as a “complex and long-term undertaking.” He said that he did not support the US intervening to fight the war itself with the kind of “large military contingent” deployed in the previous Iraq war, unless a series of US “assumptions are rendered invalid.”

These include the consolidation of an “inclusive” government in Baghdad and the development of the Iraqi Security Forces to the extent that they are capable of taking back the areas of Anbar and Nineveh province that were overrun by ISIS.

Neither of these “assumptions” is by any means certain. The Iraqi government remains dominated by Shia sectarian parties, and Shia militias have been responsible for the bulk of the advances made against ISIS, which have been accompanied by attacks on the

Sunni civilian population and episodes of “ethnic cleansing” to drive Sunnis out of villages near Shia population centers. Such military victories, won with the backing of US air strikes, have only served to deepen the sectarian divisions in Iraq and strengthen the Sunni resistance, which was the central element in facilitating the ISIS offensive.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi military remains largely in disarray, despite recent sackings of dozens of generals and other senior officers by the new government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. A classified assessment of the state of the Iraqi military conducted by the Pentagon in July concluded that barely half the existing units were even fit to be trained by US “advisers.” It warned, moreover, that many units were infiltrated by both Sunni militants and Shia militiamen, raising a distinct threat that US personnel training them could come under the kind of “insider” attacks that became commonplace in Afghanistan.

Dempsey spoke in terms of “80,000 competent” Iraqi troops being needed to defeat ISIS in Iraq. In their absence, he suggested, US forces could be called upon to fill the breach.

Further emphasizing the fraud of President Barack Obama’s pledge that the new war in the Middle East would not see American “boots on the ground,” the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Representative Buck McKeon, warned that he would kill any legislation authorizing the use of military force in Iraq and Syria that included a proscription on the use of US combat troops.

“I will not support sending our military into harm’s way with their arms tied behind their backs,” he said.

In questioning Dempsey, McKeon demanded, “How can you successfully execute the mission you’ve been given to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL (ISIS)

when some of your best options are taken off the table?”

The administration, which is seeking congressional approval of \$5.6 billion in funding for the new war, has reversed its earlier stand that it did not need a congressional vote on the war itself and has indicated that it will seek an Authorization of the Use of Military Force (AUMF) along the lines of those passed in 2001 and 2003, paving the way to over a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, as it escalates the US-led war in Iraq, the Obama administration is reportedly also debating a shift in its strategy in neighboring Syria to further regime change, i.e., bringing down the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Wrestling with the inherent contradictions in its new war—which is ostensibly directed against ISIS, whose advances were made possible by the arms and aid provided by Washington and its regional allies to it and other Islamist-led militias—the administration has reportedly concluded that its stated policy of “Iraq first” and then Syria is no longer tenable.

The limited US air strikes that have been conducted in Syria, outside of the attacks on ISIS fighters seeking to overrun the Kurdish town of Kobani on the Turkish border, have been directed at both ISIS targets and those of the Al Nusra Front, which is the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda. They have apparently had the unintended effect of bringing together these two Islamist factions, which had previously been at each other’s throats, while weakening their supposedly more “moderate” US-backed Sunni militias opposed to the Assad regime.

Together these two Islamist factions, which reportedly reached a unity pact last week, constitute the bulk—and by far the most combat effective—of the forces opposed to Assad. They recently routed US-backed factions like the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and the Hazm Movement, large sections of which defected along with their US-supplied arms to Al Nusra.

According to CNN, the White House has convened a series of meetings of national security principals on the crisis in Syria and has concluded that, “ISIS may not be defeated without a political transition in Syria and the removal of President Bashar al-Assad.”

In part, according to the report, the administration is responding to mounting pressure from its regional

allies, particularly Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States—backers of the Islamist militias in Syria, whose main interest is the overthrow of Assad.

“Among the options being discussed are a no-fly zone on the border with Turkey and accelerating and expanding the Pentagon program to vet, train and arm the moderate opposition,” according to CNN.

The imposition of a no-fly zone, which has been demanded by Turkey, would entail an intense US bombing campaign to knock out Syria’s air force and air defenses, turning the new Middle East intervention into a direct war on Syria.

Even as the White House and the Pentagon prepare for a major escalation of the war in the Middle East, US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel Friday announced that a review of the US nuclear war arsenal had concluded that billions more must be spent to ensure that US nuclear weapons are “safe, secure and effective.”

The review, initiated following a series of scandals involving cheating and drug use by missile launch crews and misconduct by the nuclear war force’s most senior commanders, concluded that a 10 percent increase is needed in the \$15-16 billion budget for the nuclear force over each of the next five years.

Pentagon officials claimed that the nuclear arsenal had been neglected because of 13 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The turn to modernize the nuclear war force is being carried out in the context of US military provocations against both Russia and China and points to the growing danger of a nuclear Third World War.



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