

Pentagon chief hints at shift in US policy in war with ISIS

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US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter declared in a television interview broadcast Sunday that Iraqi forces were routed at Ramadi because they lacked the “will to fight,” not because they were outgunned by the Sunni-based insurgent group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In the harshest public criticism of the performance of Iraqi government troops since their collapse last summer in Mosul, Carter said, “What apparently happened was that the Iraqi forces just showed no will to fight. They were not outnumbered but in fact they vastly outnumbered the opposing force, and yet they failed to fight. They withdrew from the site.”

Carter sought to deflect blame from the Obama administration for the debacle in Ramadi, which has led to mounting calls in Congress and much of the media for a more aggressive US intervention in Iraq and Syria, including the possible deployment of ground troops.

The Pentagon chief stuck to the position of the White House, that it was up to the Iraqis to do the fighting on the ground, not the United States: “They’re the ones that have to beat ISIL and then keep them beaten. We can participate in the defeat of ISIL but we can’t make Iraq run as a decent place for people to live. We can’t sustain the victory. Only the Iraqis can do that, and in particular, in this case, the Sunni tribes to the west.”

Carter then continued, in words that were widely commented on and replayed throughout the American media on Sunday: “If there comes a time when we need to change the kinds of support we’re giving to the Iraqi forces, we’ll make that recommendation.”

This came in response to a question about expanding the role of US forces in Iraq to include forward air controllers and other ground personnel who would participate in combat more directly than the 3,000 troops already there, who are mainly in an advisory or

training role.

Carter was hinting not only about the possibility of recommending ground troops—echoing comments made last fall by General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—but about a radical change in the way US military supplies are delivered to Iraqi fighters.

The Pentagon appropriations bill that just passed the House of Representatives calls for direct US military aid to both Kurdish peshmerga forces in northern Iraq and Sunni tribal militias in the west, without routing the aid through Baghdad. The bill bypasses a longtime legal ban on such aid to nongovernmental forces by designating both Kurdistan and the Sunni tribes as “nations” for the purpose of supplying military equipment, an action that sparked protests from the Shiite-dominated Iraqi central government.

Carter’s reference to “the Sunni tribes to the west” was a clear signal to Baghdad that the Obama administration is preparing a shift in policy that could lead, relatively quickly, to the dismemberment of Iraq along sectarian lines.

In a joint appearance on CNN’s Sunday interview program “State of the Union,” which broadcast the brief comments by Carter, two US representatives, a Democrat and a Republican, gave their backing to the proposal to arm the Sunni tribes directly, without Baghdad’s approval.

Republican representative Adam Kinzinger of Illinois backed a call by Senator John McCain for 10,000 US troops in Iraq (which the former Republican presidential nominee repeated during appearances on several Sunday interview programs). This policy has also had the backing of numerous congressional Republicans and Republican presidential candidates, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board, and U.S. Navy Adm. James Stavridis, who retired in 2013 as NATO’s

supreme allied commander.

Democratic representative Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii, an Iraq War veteran, said, “the Iraqi government actually does have a choice. They have a choice by arming directly the Sunni tribesmen.” She added that she had cosponsored the amendment to the military spending bill, the National Defense Authorization Act, to approve direct US military aid to the Kurds and Sunnis.

Gabbard suggested that the Shiite militias were just as dangerous opponents of the US government as ISIS, citing the remarks of Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr threatening to target US interests if the military aid bill for the Sunnis and Kurds was adopted.

This was essentially the same line espoused by the neoconservative war hawk John Bolton, UN ambassador in the Bush administration, in an appearance on Fox News Sunday. Bolton took it to the extreme, however, calling for the outright partitioning of both Iraq and Syria, with the US supporting Kurdish and Sunni states and cutting off all military aid to Baghdad.

“I think our objective should be a new Sunni state out of the western part of Iraq, the eastern part of Syria run by moderates or at least authoritarians who are not radical Islamists,” he said. “What’s left of the state of Iraq, as of right now, is simply a satellite of the Ayatollahs in Tehran. It’s not anything we should try to aid.”

While the representatives of American imperialism debated policy in the wake of the Ramadi defeat, ISIS continued to press its offensive operations in both Iraq and Syria. CBS reported that ISIS fighters seized the al-Waleed crossing on the border between Syria and Anbar province in Iraq on Sunday, giving them control of both main east-west roads between Syria and Iraq.

There was heavy fighting throughout the area between Ramadi and Fallujah, both cities now held by ISIS, as the Islamists sought to consolidate the territory under their control and mop up the remaining pro-government forces in eastern Anbar province. Shiite militias entered this battle, their first since the Baghdad government ordered them into Anbar province. US warplanes made repeated airstrikes in the area and the outcome of this fighting remains uncertain.

To the north, fighting raged around the largest Iraqi oil refinery at Baiji, with one report—citing unidentified

US officials—that a small number of Iranian troops have entered the battle, helping Shiite militias by operating artillery and other heavy weapons. The official US military statement described airstrikes around Baiji and made no mention of an Iranian role in the fighting.

There were dozens of other airstrikes throughout Anbar and Nineveh provinces, including the cities of Mosul and Tal Afar, as well as on the outskirts of Kirkuk, the center of oil production held by Kurdish forces.

In Syria, there were airstrikes near al-Hasakah, Dayr Az Zawr, Kobani and Tadmur. The last-named town is adjacent to Palmyra, the crossroads city and location of historic pre-Islamic ruins, which fell to ISIS fighters last week.



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