

As efforts to train new Iraqi army flounder

US secretary of defense threatens breakup of Iraq

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The US military's efforts to train new Iraqi forces for campaigns to retake Ramadi and other areas of Anbar province from Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have been hampered by a severe lack of willing recruits, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey told legislators during congressional testimony Wednesday.

The US training program has only recruited some 7,000 Iraqis out of the 24,000 which the US military planned to train by the end of the summer. "We simply haven't received enough recruits," Carter testified.

Carter warned that the failure of the new US proxy army to assemble sufficient Iraqi troops may force the US to withdraw support from the central government in favor of partition of Iraq into several mini-states and ethno-sectarian enclaves.

"What if a multi-sectarian Iraq turns out not to be possible? That is an important part of our strategy now on the ground," Carter said.

"If that government can't do what it's supposed to do, then we will still try to enable local ground forces," he explained. "But there will not be a single state of Iraq."

According to Carter the Pentagon is already moving to "expedite and reinvigorate recruitment of Sunni fighters." The US will be equipping the Sunni tribal forces with anti-tank missiles and other heavy military hardware.

The vast array of US military assets positioned throughout the Middle East is being readied for emergency interventions throughout the broader Iraq-Syria war theater. The Defense Secretary made clear that tens of thousands of US troops are on high alert for

new operations that may include clashes with Iranian-backed forces.

"We have 35,000 forces postured throughout the region, standing by to strike ISIL and al Qaeda terrorists and check Iranian malign influence," Carter said.

US Defense Department plans announced last week to establish a network of new US military garrisons throughout Anbar province and broader areas of Iraq. These so-called "lily pads" are aimed at establishing a new framework for US neocolonial rule in Iraq.

Under the strategy laid out by Dempsey, the US would aim to organize a "network of regional stakeholders" based around the new military outposts. According to Dempsey, such an approach would give American forces "access to more tribes."

As Carter's remarks Wednesday make clear, the new "lily pads" described by Dempsey may soon be used to undermine and even replace the regime in Baghdad, which has increasingly aligned with Iran and relied on Iranian-linked militias to defend itself.

A growing chorus of voices within the US ruling elite is advancing calls for military escalation in Iraq even more dramatic than the plans outlined by Carter and Dempsey.

"Iraq is fractured. The cow has left the barn," the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee, Democrat Adam Schiff, declared during Wednesday's session, rejecting any further US support for Iraq's federal government. "You can make a pretty powerful argument, in fact, that Iraq is no more."

In a report published this week, the Brookings Institution think tank called for the Obama administration to triple the current US military presence

in Iraq. Brookings' senior analyst Michael O'Hanlon called for some 7,000 additional US troops to be "surged" into Iraq, including Special Forces combat units deployed "unannounced" for "direct action" missions.

"While 'shock and awe' has a bad name in Iraq, it is an undeniable military reality that hitting hard keeps an enemy off balance," O'Hanlon wrote.

The Pentagon should implement a buildup aimed at transforming the current US presence into something "akin to the current mission in Afghanistan, where 10,000 US troops now support the Afghan armed forces," O'Hanlon wrote.

Such an intervention would draw the US into conflict with the growing presence of Iranian-backed forces inside Iraq, O'Hanlon openly acknowledged. Iran-backed militias fighting alongside Iraqi forces would have to be "corralled" and subsequently "individually vetted and brought under the organizational mantra of the Iraqi National Guard."

On the same day as Carter's testimony to the Armed Services Committee, the US House of Representatives voted 288-139 to reject a resolution that would have required the Obama administration to withdraw US forces from operations in Iraq and Syria.

Prior to Wednesday's vote, the administration's ten-month-old Iraq-Syria war had never been subject to any formal proceedings or even discussion within either house of Congress, despite far exceeding the legal 30-day limit on military deployments without congressional sanction established by the War Powers Act. According to the law, the president is required to seek formal authorization from Congress for any further military operations beyond the one-month limit.

Congress excused itself from placing any check on President Obama despite the scale of the ongoing US war in Iraq and Syria, code-named Operation Inherent Resolve, which has included some 4,500 airstrikes and an ever growing commitment of thousands of US ground forces.

While it comes as no surprise, the House vote nonetheless provides further confirmation that the congressional leadership of both parties has no intention of challenging the essentially limitless war-making powers claimed by the White House and the military-intelligence apparatus since the declaration of the "Global War on Terror" in 2001.

Facing no effective opposition from Congress, there can be little doubt the Pentagon will proceed with the reintroduction of thousands more US troops into Iraq and the further intensification of an air campaign that has already killed as many as 850 civilians during the past year.

Even as the votes were being counted in Congress, jet fighters under the US-led Combined Joint Task Force continued to attack targets in Iraq and Syria, launching at least 22 strikes Wednesday and Thursday.



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