

Iraq-Syria war could fragment both countries, top US general says

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The US war against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) will require a “generational” and “trans-regional” commitment of US forces, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey said Tuesday, at a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

According to Dempsey, the threat of ISIS requires sustained US military pressure not just in Iraq and Syria but in the Sinai peninsula, Afghanistan, Libya and elsewhere.

US military operations must be tailored to cope with the potential breakup of Iraq’s central unified state, Dempsey said. The US intervention must be “flexible enough that we can continue building even without an inclusive national unity government in Iraq.”

He was responding to Senator Joe Manchin, a Democrat from West Virginia, who asked, midway through the hearing, “Why are we defending the lines drawn by the British 100 years ago? It seems we are training people to fight for a territory they don’t believe is their country.”

“I share that concern, that the Middle East will never be the same Middle East again,” Dempsey replied.

Plans are being developed to bypass Baghdad and conduct military operations through alliances with local and provincial forces, if necessary. US forces are “trying to form a network of partners” in Iraq and along the Iraq-Syria border, including Syrian Kurdish YPG, Dempsey said.

Recruitment of proxy forces into the US network will provide “options that will allow us to shape and react depending on how the internal situation evolves,” he continued.

The Iraq-Syria campaign, which already includes some 3,600 US ground troops and 1,600 pilots, will need to be further “strengthened on the ground,” US

Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter said during the hearing.

While defending the Obama administration strategy, Carter acknowledged that the US-backed government of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi does not even have full control within the capital city, saying, “It’s clear that Abadi doesn’t have absolute control in Baghdad,” confirming an assessment made during another congressional hearing last month.

Abadi is prepared to accept a US-backed transition to a “de-centralized Iraq,” in which a new form of governance would allow greater autonomy to regional forces “to maintain security within their own territory, govern themselves, and share in the oil wealth of the country,” Carter said, referring to recent discussions with the Iraqi leader.

He noted that the US aims for an arrangement in which the “Kurds, Sunnis, and Shia each have enough space.” Should such efforts fail, Iraq faces the prospect of “total sectarian disintegration.”

In line with these aims, the US will step up efforts to arm Kurdish forces, which constitute “an effective ground force” that can “take and hold territory,” Carter said.

ISIS emerged directly out of sectarian and extremist groups that were a byproduct of the US invasion and conquest of Iraq in 2003. The group revived during the Syrian civil war that began in 2011, and was built up by Washington and its allies to fight the government of President Bashar al-Assad, before clashing with the US again after it crossed the border back into Iraq late in 2013.

While ISIS is the immediate focus of the US-led war, its ultimate purpose is to overthrow the Assad regime as well and cement US domination over both countries, and the larger Middle East.

Washington is currently holding planning sessions with the Turkish, Jordanian, and Israeli governments to plan for the vacuum that will follow the downfall or overthrow of Assad, Dempsey testified on Tuesday.

“Israel and Jordan believe that the Assad regime could soon collapse, touching off a foot race of al-Qaeda and Islamic State forces converging on Damascus,” Dempsey said.

With the Pentagon’s Syrian “train and equip” program in disarray, having rallied only 60 recruits as of July 3, this scenario would undoubtedly involve the intervention of US forces fighting both the remnants of Assad’s forces and the Islamists.

Undeterred by the snowballing debacle, the Obama administration is preparing to double down on its Iraq-Syria policy, moving forward with further buildup of the US ground presence and at the same time mobilizing yet more sectarian militias to serve as proxies of its geopolitical aims.

For its final year and a half in office, the Obama administration is considering an aggressive new strategy that would “more forcefully address conflicts in Iraq, Yemen and Syria” and bring about the removal of Assad from power, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on Monday.

Twelve years after the US invasion of Iraq set into motion the political and social disintegration of vast areas of the Middle East, and a year after the launching of “Operation Inherent Resolve,” including more than 15,000 airstrikes and the deployment of thousands of US ground troops, Washington is preparing to plunge deeper into an open-ended war in the Middle East.



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