

Pentagon in talks with Baghdad on permanent US occupation of Iraq

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The Trump administration and the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi are engaged in negotiations over a proposal that would maintain a permanent US troop presence in Iraq, according to American and Iraqi officials cited by the Associated Press (AP).

The talks come more than 14 years after the US military invaded the country and unleashed a bloodbath that cost over a million lives and left the entire country shattered. The ostensible purpose of the permanent US presence is to train Iraqi forces and to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) after the anticipated fall of its last stronghold in Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city.

Defense Secretary James "Mad Dog" Mattis, who commanded the 1st Marine Division during the Iraq invasion and was responsible for numerous atrocities committed in the country, is leading the talks with Iraqi officials, according to the AP report.

The Obama administration formally withdrew US forces, which at their highpoint numbered 170,000, in 2011. The American military presence, however, never fully ended. Under the so-called Operation Inherent Resolve launched in 2014 following the overrunning of Mosul and a broad swathe of Iraq by ISIS, US forces have risen officially to 5,000, while the real number of troops is well over 7,000 as the Pentagon uses temporary deployments to escalate the American intervention.

According to the AP, US forces would remain after Mosul's fall, deployed in at least five bases around the city as well as ones on the Iraqi-Syrian border.

"There is a general understanding on both sides that it would be in the long-term interests of each to have that continued presence," a US official told the news agency. "So as for agreement, yes, we both understand

it would be mutually beneficial. That we agree on."

The official said that the number of American troops that would remain indefinitely in Iraq would be "several thousand...similar to what we have now, maybe a little more."

The discussions are unfolding under the shadow of the more than six-month-long bloody US-backed offensive by Iraqi government forces against Mosul. American warplanes, Apache attack helicopters and heavy artillery have played a decisive role in the siege, reducing much of the city to rubble and inflicting thousands of civilian casualties. US special operations troops are participating alongside Iraqi forces in the battle to retake the city.

In the latest atrocity, a strike by US warplanes killed at least 11 civilians in a district of western Mosul on Thursday. The Shafaq news web site, quoting local sources, reported that women and children were among the dead.

The Pentagon routinely denies responsibility for civilian deaths or grossly underestimates the toll inflicted by American airstrikes. It has been compelled, however, to open an investigation into a March 17 attack that is estimated to have killed over 200 people, including over 100 people who had taken refuge in one house.

After the horrific scale of the carnage inflicted by the strike became known, both US and Iraqi military spokesmen attempted to blame the deaths on ISIS, claiming that it had herded people into a house booby-trapped with explosives and then lured the American warplanes into attacking it.

Survivors of the airstrike have angrily denounced these claims as lies. The survivors, according to AP, "described a horrifying battlefield where airstrikes and artillery pound neighborhoods relentlessly, trying to

root out ISIS militants, leveling hundreds of buildings, many with civilians inside, despite the constant flight of surveillance drones overhead.”

Ali Zanoun, one of only two people to survive the strike on the house where more than 100 died, told the news agency that it had belonged to a local businessman who had sheltered a dozen families seeking refuge. It was thought to be safe because it was only two stories and therefore not of use to ISIS snipers. Zanoun denied that ISIS had ever entered the house, much less planted explosives there.

Zanoun spent five days buried in the rubble, surrounded by the remains of 20 members of his family, before he was rescued. “My entire family is gone,” Zanoun told AP. “They melted. Not even a fingernail or a little bone found.”

According to Iraq Body Count, an independent monitoring group, US airstrikes killed 1,117 people in western Mosul in March and April alone. The UN, meanwhile, has released evidence showing that 1,590 residential buildings have been destroyed in western Mosul over the same period.

At least 400,000 people have been displaced by the US-backed siege, while conditions for the hundreds of thousands more who remain in western Mosul are described as catastrophic. The same Western media that last year cried crocodile tears about conditions in Aleppo, Syria, in order to feed US war propaganda against Russia and the Syrian government, has largely ignored the bloodbath now unfolding barely 300 miles to the east.

If the US and Iraqi government forces do succeed in retaking all of Mosul, while reducing this ancient city on the banks of the Tigris river to rubble, it will by no means spell an end to the savage conflict that was unleashed by the US invasion in 2003.

Sectarian divisions, manipulated by the US occupation as part of a divide-and-rule strategy, will only be exacerbated by the siege. It is being waged by a predominantly Shia army, backed by Shia sectarian and Kurdish militias, against a largely Sunni population, which had bitterly resented repression by the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad before ISIS took control in 2014.

Washington will no doubt utilize continuing sectarian conflict as a pretext for maintaining and escalating its military intervention in the country. The aim of this

intervention, like the 2003 invasion itself, will be to further the drive for US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East and to counter the considerable influence of Iran in Iraq and the region as a whole.



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